Season of Pomegranate

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Naim dhe Sami Flamuri
'Koha e Shegës'

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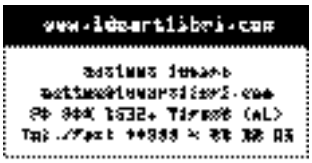


Naim & Sami
F L A M U R I

Season of Pomegranate

Revised and edited from the original book in Albanian ; “Koha e Shegës” by the authors.

46:15

We have enjoined man to show kindness to his parents.
Inspire me Lord, to give thanks for the favours you have bestowed
on me and on my parents and to do good works that will please you.
Grant me good descendants. To You I turn and to you I submit.

Introduction

We are Naim and Sami, the Flamuri twins, and we are starting our story, which we have titled, "Season of Pomegranate."

We have baptized the book this way for reasons that you, dear reader will understand in due course and time.

To make things easy, let's say that this is a novel, but in itself this is nothing but a life story, a true story about our life. Some experts in this field will probably classify this book as a real story because it is; but let's not give any particular name or genre. This book is fiction and non-fiction, and at the same time, a monologue, a dialogue, memories, history, catalogue of photos and a herbarium made with the leaves of remembrance which have faded with the years gone by, and now only live in the memory. To cut it short, this text is always open in perplexity and is being rewritten as we go.

In this text, you will meet the unusual fate of an Albanian family, to which we the authors belong. You will continue to be perplexed at our fate, as due to circumstances, we had to endure the hardship of life to ultimately to come together again, under the skin of a pomegranate like the seed of the fallen pomegranate, scattered everywhere. We do not think that we made the impossible possible but at the same time, we have bared our soul for what we thought is our duty to confess. We begin our history with our life journey, the destiny of one family, who in its path, intermediates with other families. Ulqin, the city on the southern

shores of the Adriatic Sea. In many instances, you, the dear reader, will find it difficult to know who is narrating the story. Being a twin has its downfalls but let this be a secret because the secrecy and mystery is for us to be kept in trust; a hideout that is hard to unravel.

"Yahuu, Yahuu.", the chanting of the Sufi, Dervish Rasim would mesmerise us.

"To the one who believes I am dead SAY I am Alive!!! And to the one who believes I am alive, SAY that I am dead."

This book draws inspiration from that saying and all that is good and smart with high morals of gratitude.

Blood Stained Shirt

1969.

In this heroic world we have finally arrived; two bodies, two hearts beating like one. We were born twins, from our mother's womb in Balmain hospital in Sydney, the capital of New South Wales, in faraway Australia.

The former Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Keating during a private conversation referred to Australia as 'the arse end of the world" to some beginning of it. Then, we did not have knowledge that the bond between two brothers is like an uncut umbilical cord, but we were to learn that later in life.

Christ said;

"Truly, Truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

The meaning behind this saying of Christ is that first we are born from the womb of our mother, and the second time, from the heavenly breath which will rekindle the spirit of humanity.

This is all that I, Naim[1] had to say.

Let's leave the rest of the confession to Sami[2]. Somehow, it's in his

[1] Naim: The younger twin.
[2] Sami: The older twin.

head that the future starts with one error or like the poet Gianni Rodari3, in his reminder to us all; "Often, errors aren't found in words."

Rodari urges, "But in things; it is necessary to correct dictation, but necessary above all things to correct the world."

Let's let Sami start retelling this story.

When we were born, possibly not drunk only from the happiness and glory of being blessed with two healthy twin boys, our father's wish was for his twins to have some meaningful names that make sense; not only plain names, but also patriotic Albanian names. In any case, not some backward names of an era long gone by when Albania was only a blip in the radar of the Ottoman Empire. My father would not even consider Arab names like Muhammad or Shaban that have some meaning in Arabic; it was below his belt and an insult to his intelligence. Knowing all this heartfelt emotion of our father, his best friend at the time, Mr. Jashar Domniku, a short man from Kosova, who Father nicknamed due to his short stature, "Meter and Gillette" made sure that justice would be done. So, he whispered two names in my father's ear that he thought were the ones to be reckoned with.

"Listen! These boys are born with the names, and they are not like everyone, so they will be named Sami and Naim."

What was said was done. As luck would have it, fate was not very kind to this little man, Jashar; he never had any kids of his own. So, as Sami was older by birth, he was given a name in glory of two of the most respected poets of Albanian National awakening: Naim and Sami Frashëri. Naim got the other brother's name, so that was done and dusted…

Father Flamur4 was beside himself that the issue of names was resolved, so when the time came to register the name of his sons, he instead signed me as Sami. He put the wrong spelling, and instead of a male name, I was baptised with the female name, Sanie! This is all in my

[3] Gianni Rodari's "Book of Mistakes" of 1964.
[4] Father Flamur, the good-looking man winking to himself.

birth certificate. O, the irony of fate. This small spelling mistake would cause so many dramas; some funny, some sad, but here I was stuck with it. Everyone had begun to forget the noble name of Sami [5], meanwhile, teasing continued; I felt like a character from some fiction novel of the Albanian "Sworn Virgins".[6]

O misery, this mistake had to be corrected. I had to wait for almost 20 years where I finally returned to Australia to get rid of this historic error.

Let's see how our father arrived in Australia first.

Ok, Naim, it's all yours…

Flamuri would not arrive in Australia like so many migrants before him. On the contrary, he was a born adventurer with a bohemian lifestyle living "la dolce vita"[7]. It looks like he was born with the curse of a constant need to travel in order to find the Promised Land. He was known by the nickname of "FREDDY", as English people had to change every migrant's name in order to be Anglicised; hence, the baptism of fire started as they landed Australia. Islam, all of a sudden became John; Selim was turned into Sam, Mustapha, Mick and our father Flamur, Freddy…

Our father was a born drunk; a happy going romantic fool who was so giving that his famous motto was "drink for everybody", as he would shout[8] the next round of beer. He lived with the fame as the years went by, forever trapped in his own inability to be grasped with reality.

With our birth, he assumed he was back in his beloved Ulqin, where according to the Albanian tradition, this happy occasion had to be celebrated but not alone…

[5] Sami: The writer.
[6] The Albanian "Sworn Virgin": An Albanian girl born in the household full of girls who has to pretend for the rest of her life that she is a boy to keep the honour of the family with no male heir apparent.
[7] La dolce vita: The sweet life.
[8] Shout: To buy or give something to someone else in Australian lingo.

And… without further ado, what he did was find a nice bar so he could shout the celebratory drink. He did find this rundown shabby Greek tavern in the suburb of Newtown, on the outskirts of downtown Sydney.

Everyone knew Freddy when he walked in, even the boss of the joint welcomed Freddy. He was after all a happy lad and for business that meant money. Fred's ability to speak languages meant that Greek came second nature to him. Working with Greek migrants meant you had to be a fast learner, or you would be left behind but this was never the case for our Freddy; he picked up really fast. He felt that everyone should have a drink on him, shouting drinks was his favourite pastime9 and now this was a happy day for him; he wanted to share his joy in the way that suited the oldest son of JAMAL RAMA.

When the patrons of the Tavern heard the news, they all gave a spontaneous cheers with their glasses up; "Long Life and Cheers!" Almost all the guests felt a need to salute Fred's joy, except for one table in the corner, which you could not even see from the smoke of hand rolled tobacco. The noises of Greek Bouzouki was in the air, filling the last cheers of drunken customers. Not only did this table refuse, but they also insulted Freddy's offer of a drink. This was unheard of; his honour was at stake, and in an instant, everything changed. The happy mood disappeared, and Freddy's eyes went black; his gaze also turned blurry.

"Why? Why?" That's all he managed to mutter.

Only then did he realise that things were not as they should be. All eyes were on him and everything stopped; no one moved. The gazes of people were eating him alive as they all looked upon Freddy. Freddy! But which Freddy! Unexpectedly from Freddy to Flamur-Flamour was reborn again. From a migrant with an Anglicised name, Flamuri was truly back…

Imagine the "spaghetti westerns" of Sergio Leone with Enzo Morricone's music in the background. What is going to happen? Flamur

[9] Freddy/Flamur's favourite time was usually at his wife's expense.

knew that there is only one way that honour has to be protected? He continued to smile in some strange deviant way, but he was boiling inside; he invited this ungrateful bunch to suddenly come outside. They were Yugoslavs, over six-foot-tall, and in their mind, Flamur was an easy prey to eat. But Flamur, with his tiny frame was not much to look at, yet he had his flick knife hidden under his shirt.

While going down the stairs, one of the boys shouted;

"Da mu jebem majku Shiptarsku."[10]

It was a heavy insult to the honour of Flamur's mother.

In a matter of seconds, he produced the knife, and with no further ado, he started with the nearest one coming toward him, stabbing him right in his shoulder, the second one in his stomach, while the third one started pleading in his native Slavic tongue;

"Nemooj, Nemooj."[11]

"So, is this the way you respect my happiness in the birth of my sons? You motherfucker, you should have thought of consciences before, not now; stay there and bleed like a cunt…"

In the meantime, the commotion in the tavern caused everybody to move out, and in the distance, you could hear the ominous siren of police. But the Greek owner of the Tavern Apostoli liked Flamur, so he offered him a quick exit which was the only way out of this mess. Our birth without the fanfare was suddenly baptised in the blood of the innocent bystanders.

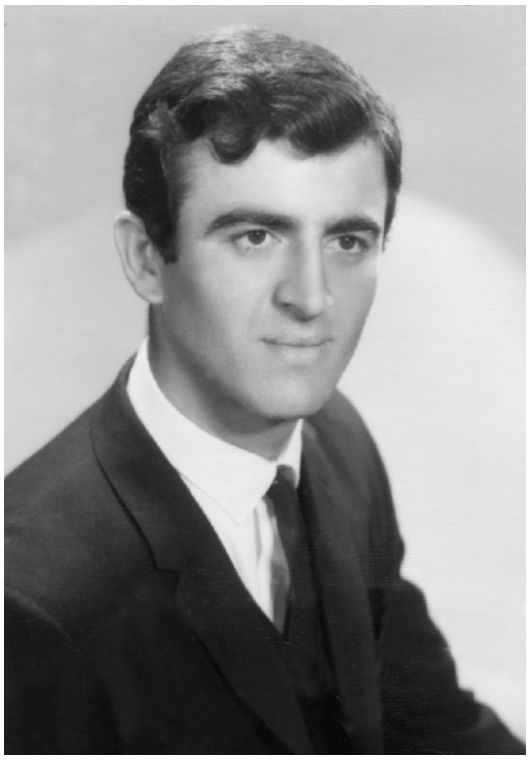
When our mother[12], Najia came home to see her beloved husband lying on the sofa, the bloody shirt stared at her like a reminder of some primitive ritual.

[10] Da mu jebem majku Shiptarsku: Fuck his Albanian mother.
[11] Nemooj: Don't.
[12] Nana is another name for mother.

"Dear God!" She screamed at the unsavoury sight that awaited her; the happiness had turned sour!

"Why, dear God did it have to start like this?"

This scary silence filled the room…even today, we don't know if she ever found the answer to what happened on that bloody day?



The Name of Flamur

1941.

In that glorious year, our dear father had his first baby cry.

Our father was the chosen one, to have a name Flamur; it coincided with the Albanian Flag Day, hence his name. He was born on the same year that Albania was occupied by the Germans. For some, a dark day in our history; for others, a blessing in disguise as we had the dream of a United Albania within our reach. In essence, this was more like liberation of Albanian Lands, which had previously languished under different invaders, and now finally together as one rejoicing the victory. Oddly enough, modern historians would say that Albania was an exception for that time as it was the only country that was liberated by its own forces at the end of the World War II. No Soviet Union as neighbours in Yugoslavia, no Western alliance to reclaim this trophy for themselves; it was purely and solely on its own merit.

The son of Jamal was born on the Flag Day of Albania on the plains of Southern Albania, the "Land of Tosks" town of Lushnja. The local priest of the town had a good reason to name him Flamur, which is the Albanian equivalent of the name "FLAG." Flag man, Flamur.

This was the first name of this kind for the Ana e Malit[13] region, where we have to remain our dear readers. Albania of the earlier twentieth

[13] Ana e Malit: The side of the mountain.

century was a backdrop that has seen many armies come and as such, this name was unique as it did not borrow from any other language save Albanian itself.

The reason our father was born in southern Albania was due to the blood feud. At the same time Italy capitulated, Germany arrived. This heavy burden with blood vengeance at the centre is present even in today's Albania, where old Canon of Albanian highlands[14], still holds value today.

"Blood can be wiped only with blood."

This is how the early English travelled to Albania. Edith Durham describes in her book[15] this curse:

"The unwritten law of blood is to the Albanian as is the Fury of Greek tragedy. It drives him inexorably to his doom. The curse of blood is upon him when he is born, and it sends him to an early grave. So much accustomed is he to the knowledge that he must shoot or be shot that it affects his spirits no more than does the fact that 'Man is mortal' spoil the dinner of a plump tradesman in West Europe."

This way the curse of the blood prevails in the darkness of evil. Mehr Licht! More, Light!

This would be the last words of GOETHE. These forms of paradox for an Albanian would create a beast from a meek and mellow person in an instant. "The Canon of Lek", an unwritten law of Albania was a rule to never be broken. In order to understand why our father was born in Southern Albania, and not the north plains of his ancestry land, we have to rekindle the story of Shab, the older uncle of our father.

In his youth, he did a terrible crime, almost macabre to the point that he executed both uncles in cold blood. Even today, I have shivers in my spine thinking of it.

[14] The old Canon of Albanian highlands resembles an Italian vendetta.
[15] Edith Durham's "High Albania" of 1910.

But what stirred him so bad that he had to commit this heinous crime in his early 20s?

Ram Shaba would never take responsibility for inciting this murder of two brothers in the village of Milla!

Do you have an idea where Milla is situated? This small village is situated at the southern-border of Montenegro overlooking the Albanian Mountains. A placid place which as its main trade and industry, was the graining of the corn from the numerous water mills it possessed at the beginning of last century. There were more than 15 mills, and water, which means life was in abundance, and that was what Milla had in oversupply. But this idyllic landscape would not last as long as so many places before in the mid-1950s. The Communist elite would blow this pure source of water with dynamite to create a new road. Bravo! However, the dynamite obliterated the water; forever gone, only memories remain. Millë means flour in Albanian, hence its name. How could such a monstrosity be committed from an almost idyllic piece of earth? We often pondered this ourselves.

So, who, was this man of character that was Flamur's grandfather Ram-Shaba, our great grandfather? In the old days, we had our own water spring called the spring of Pera, derived from the old Greek word for rock "Petros". It is an interesting fact that we have come upon a lost photo of Ramo Shaba, by pure luck, and we were almost left lost for words to encounter this long lost face. Altogether, it is great that we can now put a face behind the story.

Rama had a very bittersweet story that did bother him; from being a police gendarme in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, city of Istanbul, to 12 years of exile with nothing to show to his godforsaken village for no apparent reason. With this twist of fate, Rama was back, high in the mountains and bored to death, shattered in his thoughts about what he did to endure the misery, the twist of fate. The curse of inciting the younger son to commit such a crime could be a rightful answer, but who are we to know that? In the background of that, old Ramo was murmuring the words from "the Canon" that must be obeyed. "What profit is life to a man if his honour be not clean?"

The Second Coming of Ramo from Istanbul

1909.

He returned a broken man; the question lingering in the sky. Why would he leave the city lights of the heart of the Ottoman Empire with many mosques, minarets scattered in every corner piercing the sky where Asia meets Europe on the shores of Bosporus Istanbul in full glory.

"Why did I return to this hellhole of a place?"

Ram would in many instances talk to himself. This "Land of the living past" does not exist in a map, let alone configure like one. In many instances, he would get some home-made tobacco with his favourite smoking pipe made from pure silver; the arabesque drawing would make him a stand out man…The only thing this man could show for all the years that he was in Turkey was an old one barrel shot gun, a "KARADAK"[16].

There would be his long-suffering wife A'leme, fuming with anger that this man did not bring nothing good to a family, nothing to show to his village or family per se.

"Ah, A'Leme! A'Leme, darling… you worry too much."

Ram would try to justify his shortcomings but to no avail; being a loser is a hard pill to swallow.

In a short time, he went from the proud policeman of the Empire to a laughing stock in the village, a target of ridicule for local kids.

[16] Karadak: "Black mountain" in Turkish language.

The old house was typically Albanian, made of stone with a tiled roof. The ground floor would be a stable for the farm animals. An outside staircase of stone or wood, which often leads to a large covered balcony, approaches the dwelling-room with a wood oven above. There are few windows, and they're small due to the constant vendettas. The fire is lit on an open hearth at one end, the smoke escaping through the unsealed roof. Behind the hearth is a recess in the wall to contain cooking utensils. Many houses would have a wattled larder standing on posts in the yard, especially to keep milk in. Every house expected guests. This was an old custom; the house belongs "to guest and God" bread, salt and open heart as an old saying goes.

Old Ramo was a hospitable man who with a glass of "raki"[17], known also as "grappa" by Italians, would lay his soul open, often telling the tales from the past of dark-eyed beauties belly dancing all night long.

He would confine this story to only a select few because in the eyes of uneducated mountain folk, this was a mere figment of imagination than a true story. Many years back, with the introduction of TVs, the fable stories of Ram would come to life.

A'Leme was sick and tired of Ram's stories as she had to bear the heavy burden of raising four children almost as a single mother; our grandfather, Jamal, his younger siblings Shab and Ismail, little sister Bega, who was subsequently married in Albania proper, just a bus stop away.

After the Second World War, Bega was a mere spitting distance away from her village, with the closing of the border after Yugoslavia broke from Soviet Union in 1948. Crossing between Albania and Montenegro would be stopped, and her life would be forever changed. She was doomed to not see her beloved brothers for almost half a century; what an irony of fate that reminds you today of North Korea.

Ramo Shaba was busy putting old brigands and thieves away in

[17] Raki: The clear spirit/alcohol made from grapes. Also known as "grappa" by Italians.

jail holes of the Ottoman Empire, Arnavutköy[18] - Üsküdar, a suburb in Istanbul. Eating and drinking, living a life of pure joy; his senses were changed forever in the mist of hookah smoking opium dreaming of greener pastures. He did not feel the longing of the past indulging in a feast that would be unimaginable; a pipe dream in his prior life. Eventually, all this past came to haunt him, especially with his in-laws who did prosper and were quite well off. This made him mad with anger, the jealousy eating him from inside.

A'Leme would cut through him as she would her fresh cottage cheese, but she insisted that on the other hand, they were lucky; at least, they had no need for handouts as the family would be there to help. But Ram would not accept the pettiness from any one; he was too proud and stubborn as a mule.

The blood and the essence of an Ottoman, "gendarme"[19]. Ram was an ARNAUT[20], that's how the Turks would rename Albanians. It serves as a superlative to Albanians, who would never return from the battle defeated as such highly priced as guards in the court of the Sultan himself.

Ramo was a respected man in Istanbul, and his co-patriots would often go out with him and have a good time. And as the story goes, one of his old friends fell in love with the girl, but not any girl; she was the concubine of a Turkish Sultan from his famous "Harem". Never to be touched by a mere mortal, Ram's friend hit the jack pot as he would climb the stairs towards her quarters at night where he would make love to her while he was also being paid in gold as a reward.

The harem was defined to be the women's quarters in a Muslim household. The Imperial harem[21] contained the combined households

[18] Arnavutköy: Albanian village.
[19] Gendarme: French man-at-arms/a paramilitary police officer.
[20] Arnaut: The one who never turns his back; a name ascribed to Albanians by Turks.
[21] Imperial harem is also known as Seraglio harem.

of the Valide Sultan[22], the Sultan's favourites[23], and the rest of his concubines[24]. It also contained all the Sultan's households[25]. Many of the harem women never saw the Sultan and became the servants necessary for the daily functioning of the harem.

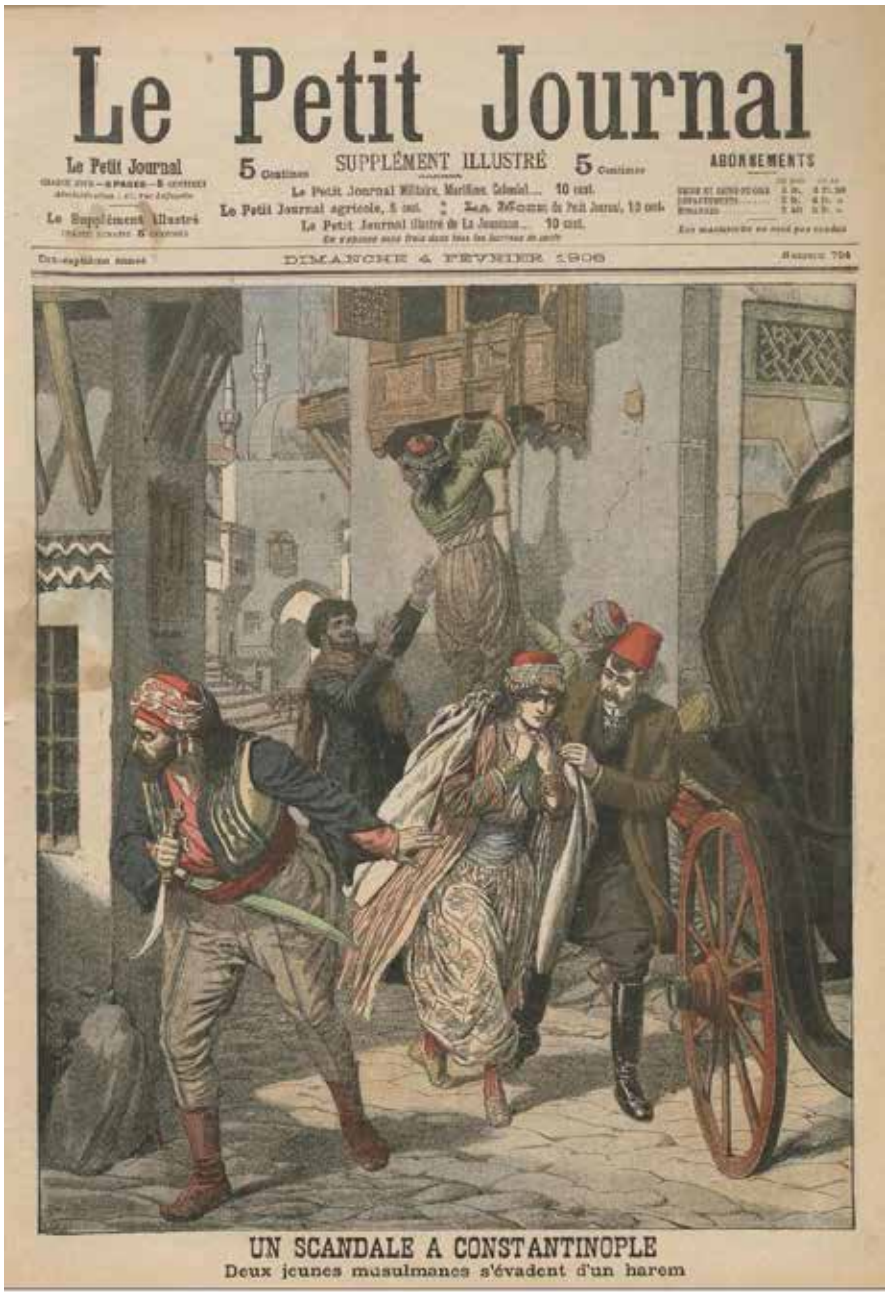
Ramo could not stand the boasting of his friend. On the contrary, he felt deep envy because he wanted to be in his shoes as he considered himself a better-looking man than Ramo. So, he made up his mind that he would try his luck to do the same in a bid to win the heart of some of the Sultan's other concubines. But since it takes two to tango, he persuaded his other friend to come with him in this conquest of the heart.

These two "Casanovas" had the perfect plan. At night, they would sneak out in the gardens where these uncut "Roses of joy" would spend their day and then try to unreel their masculine charm to these unsuspecting beauties. What a plan, only if, and that if with a capital I would almost cost them their life.

They chose this hiding spot that was a green bush, but the rest of a garden was all dry; it looked horrendous, so the bodyguards of the Sultans, concubines, the black eunuchs felt somehow suspicious.

Eunuchs were the integral other half of the harem. Eunuchs were considered to be less than men and thus, unable to be "tempted" by the harem women and would remain solely loyal to the Sultan. Eunuchs were castrated men and hence possessed no threat to the sanctity of the harem. According to Muslim tradition, no man could lay his eyes on another man's harem, thus, someone less than a man was required for the role of watchful guardianship over the harem women. Eunuchs tended to be male prisoners of war or slaves, castrated before puberty and condemned to a life of servitude.

[22] Valide Sultan: Queen Mother.
[23] Hasekis: The Sultan's favourites.
[24] The Sultan had concubines; women whose main function was to entertain him in the bed chamber.
[25] Sultan's household: Daughters of the Sultan.



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ABONNEMENTS

DIMANCHE 4 FÉVRIER 1906

UN SCANDALE A CONSTANTINOPLE

Deux jeunes musulmanes s'évadent d'un harem

As this green shrub was standing like lighthouse, it duly attracted the unwanted attention of the Eunuchs and what a sight. Two young males, ready to attack in front of their very eyes. This was a crime which could only be punished by death. The Ottoman law was unrelenting; this was not a game. They had to be presented before the grand vizier, in order to be given the well-deserved punishment.

So, with their fate already sealed, their destiny hit a stumbling block.

The despair was for all to see. They were, after all, dead men walking, until out of nowhere, the voice of the "Grand Vizier" brought them back to reality.

"So You! Yes, you! The tall one, where are you from, bloody fool?"

"Your Excellency, I am from the far away land of Albania, the region of Kraya, my tribe is ARDOLL…"

"You! Are not Ardoll, the vizier shouted, you are an imbecile, damn you!"

"And you, turning his head towards Ramo. So, what we have here? My, my…"

Ram's sorrow eyes said everything. "I am your most humble servant. This is harder than I thought. I am from Milla of Arnautisan!"26

"You! Bloody mongrels, you do not leave even poor animals in peace. I did not expect anything better from you, but this is unacceptable; you should both die."

The grand vizier was hiding the fact that his obscure origin meant he'd come from the same place as the accused, so he decided out of the pettiness to free them both. In front of them were two holes; one that led to freedom, one to despised Sharks…

They were reborn again, but the punishment was that they had to leave Istanbul, where the dreams became reality, the capital of the Empire, and never return; the doors were shut.

[26] Milla of Arnautisan: The name of Albania under the Ottoman Empire.

The Burning of the Barn

In most cases, from little things, big things grow. When something is bound to happen, it will usually move the wheel of fate in the most unpredictable way.

The brothers of the Ceka clan were the strongmen of the village, the untouchables, their word was a rule. If there were a problem, the brothers would usually fix it. Their reputation preceded them and to the villagers, this meant keeping the peace, and fear mixed with a strong hand does wonders. In one of those tranquil nights where the stars shine even more than the bright lights of Versailles, out of nowhere from the barn which was full of livestock, a big fire was coming out of the barn like a tongue of a serpent. The fire was so rapid that all the animals burned alive, and all the livelihood of the Rama Clan was gone in an instant. The barn was burning deliberately for all to see; there was not an inch of doubt about that. Old Ram was fuming with anger; he was furious as there was someone to blame for this accident, and he already knew who he should put the finger on.

They were the brothers Ceka, no one else!? Old Ram was adamant, cursing at the top of his lungs shouting to his sons;

"Your bloody uncles did it."

"I've got three sons, and not even one stand outs and is a MAN…"

"I will show them who the man of the house is." In his anger, he took some charcoal from the open hearth while Jamal, ducked for cover.

Poor A'leme, she was terrified from Ram, yelling his rampage and wrath coming unleashed his inner demons. This was dead serious. You could feel the darkness of the night becoming tense; all that smoke, screaming of animals burning, the unbearable stench of charred flesh…

"This is all we needed. Now, what else is there for us? God, have mercy on us", A'leme said.

According to the unwritten law of the Albanian Highlands, the only way that the honour of the family can be restored is to kill the perpetrators of this crime.

To make the ultimate sacrifice to the clan in order to cleanse their honour, Old Ram did a magnificent job of pursuing one-man justice, the law of arms. The second youngest of the sons, Shab felt all this more personally than the older son Jamal, who knew better than this nonsense.

Uncles are blood relatives, and they may not like you, but they will not harm you, and there was not sufficient proof of the guilt. But this did not matter to Shab; he was determined to get his job-done. He was very well aware of the movements of both uncles, so he just needed to find the right time and place to set his trap for action.

The first brother was resting in front of his house at peace with himself in the sanctuary of his own home, enjoying the afternoon meal. This was perfect timing for Shab. He was a sitting duck, oblivious to what was going to happen. The adrenalin rush that Shab felt was enough for him to pull the trigger from the hideout where he was waiting. The gun was ready, and he aimed at the head. It struck the brother right in the neck. The food went down his plate, gone to pieces, and the screaming of his innocent wife broke the silence of an afternoon breeze…

The unthinkable happened. This shoot was not good omen at all…

The village knew something terrible had happened, but not the extent that young Shab would go. He knew timing was not on his side, so he hurried up to find the second brother to get the business done.

From this young gun, to suddenly becoming a cool assassin who did not care less about the consequences of his action was like a bolt of a striking light.

Meanwhile, the other uncle was riding his horse, his heart pounding, not knowing that he was going to his imminent doom. What were those ominous shots he overheard while Shab was waiting in his ambush prowling for his next victim?

He was scared to death; he could feel a cold sweat going down his chin, but nothing would get in his way to deter him. He knew down in his heart that he can't miss this shot, so he aimed high to hit the uncle in his chest and the unmistakable sound of a gunshot! The shots evaporated through the air, the bullet not asking for any mercy. As the bullet pierced his skull with a deadly precision, the uncle was dead, and the honour that Ram wanted had been reclaimed.

But Shab had some more unfinished business to attend, and the smell of blood made him a wolf that was in the hunt for more. Faster than you could say Jack Robinson, he was already trying to find the third youngest brother.

In his mind, he had to finish them all, and there was no point of return. Fate would have it that the local imam saved the youngest brother; so as not to incur more blood, in his hands, he spared him. But he could not wait to ask him why they did it! Why did you burn our livestock?

"My dear nephew, if we'd done it, then I wish your gun was a cannon; that's all I have to say…"

The crime was over, there were no more to be done but to what cost? Blood has to be paid only in blood, there was no other option. Shab was caught by the local police; they even tortured him, but he would not say a word. In his brain, he was at peace with what had been done. The only way out for the entire Rama Clan was to escape to Southern Albania hoping that they would be safe.

"The blood of the victims is clotted in the glass and is waiting to melt, and when the time comes, the blood starts to boil…. This is the sign, and now is the time for the victim's family to look for vengeance."

They had to go far away to an unknown relative; our grandmother, Zoorayah, who was pregnant with our father. The road they took was a nightmare. At any moment, Shab was ready to snap, jittery to the point that he was ready to shut her up for good. May peace be upon her soul, but her story of how they escaped to the border is forever imprinted in our mind like a Star of David to the Jews in the Second World War.

Many years had to pass by for the blood feud to be forgiven, that the honourable clan of the Ceka tribe in the end had shown fortitude, the virtue of the highest order but to what terrible cost? Two innocent lost lives for no reason whatsoever…

After many years of exile, they returned to the village of Milla.

After more than sixty years, we did learn the bitter truth about that fateful night.

The brothers Ceka were not to blame; it was somebody else who had committed the offence done by wickedness and evil. They were some newcomers which nobody knew well, but justice prevails, and this clan never succeeded to prosper as they died in obscurity; their fate sealed with only one generation.

There were no winners in this tragedy, an eye for an eye, as the blame is always an orphan.

Life lost, kids growing up with no fathers to have as a role model; mothers crying for the sons that were taken before their time. Old Ram should have known better.

The sad thing is that Uncle Shab was never the same man; he matured before his time, and in his old age, he never stopped looking over his shoulder in fear that he may be killed. We would tease him about why he always carried his gun; he would say that he has been carrying the gun for so long that it had become part of his flesh and bones.

Uncle-Mali- Ismail

1950.

The Father of Flamur, our dear grandfather, Jamal was a tall man; his hair was thinning and grey, the pencil thin moustache. He was cunning but just a businessman that would trade in different goods, and as long there was an opportunity to gain, he would utilise it to his advantage. In post war years, he would deal in tobacco which was illegal at that time as a contraband[27]. This was his only choice as there was no other way out to provide for his family. He was a marked man being followed by UDBA.[28]

The Communist system of the Tito regime would not forget his past where he belonged to a different side of the system. The only slogan in those days was the ability to just survive despite all the circumstances. You had to make from one penny a dollar; these were our grandfather's specific set of skills to let him thrive.

He was a very astute tradesman, as he slowly would gain the trust of the small community of Ulqin. Once, he travelled almost 900 km to the North of the country in the border with Hungary to get some grain[29] for the starving population of his town. It was a long trip, but it was worthwhile, and in the end, many souls were saved due to our grandfather's gesture.

[27] Things like contraband never change in the Balkans.
[28] UDBA: Yugoslav Secret Service.
[29] Grain/Wheat.

To Flamur, as the oldest son, rested the responsibility of the family hope. He had that privileged trust above all, the unshaken belief that he could do no wrong. He was the favourite of Uncle Shab, as his rebellious nature reminded him of his youth.

It was the duty of the uncle to teach him the manhood, so smoking, drinking, and love of the gun was a norm to be envied. Being young and stupid is one thing, but deliberately giving him the knowledge of the wise was unacceptable. My grandmother Zoorayah was petrified to learn of her son's drinking excesses where all the city would talk as he would stumble into the pathways. In the end, you can't stop the gossip of a little town where everybody likes to interfere in each other's lives.

Grandmother was crying, "This is not a way I want my son to turn out."

Those cries fell on deaf ears. Flamur, was the oldest sibling in the Rama Clan, and in his eyes, this was a matter of prestige and duly tolerated.

The youngest of Rama's brothers was Ismail, or as we used to call him, "Uncle MAL."

He would warn Jamal, "My dear Brother! Your Boy…is like a tomcat, there is no hope in hell for him to ever reach Mecca…"

There were signs of desperation as Flamur's antics were going from one excess to another. On the other hand, Uncle Mali was a gentle man, more of a pen than a gun. He was in total contrast to his older brothers; education does make wonders. During the Second World War, he was in the Prime Minister's office in Albania, working as an intern. He would mention those years on many occasions with nostalgia, but the story of a coffee incident stuck in our minds.

"Uncle Mali, why do you always drink your coffee cold?"

The reason was simple. On one of those days, he was having a coffee together with the Prime Minister. That offer was simply too good

to refuse, so when he sat down to sip the coffee, suddenly the phone rang… The Prime Minister excused himself while he went downstairs to attend to his matters. Meanwhile, Uncle Mali, looking at his Turkish coffee cup, could not wait any longer, so he started drinking in one go.

When the Prime Minister, returned, he noticed Ismail had finished his coffee, so he turned to his secretary:

"Get Ismail another coffee; it seems that one was not good enough."

His pride was hurt, and his cheeks blushed red. He never felt this uncomfortable in his entire life, and he was humiliated in front of the Prime Minister.

So, from that unpleasant experience, he never drank his coffee first; he was always the last one. He suffered from many phobias. One time, he went hungry for many days from a long ride, so when he finally found a place to rest in a local house; according to Albanian hospitality, "the house of an Albanian belongs to God and to the guest." After the customary "raki"17, then to his delight, some long-awaited food; dry figs.

"Here you are Ismail, the lady of the house boasted." As soon as he ate one, the woman insisted, "Get another one, these figs are delicious."

Ismail's face went numb. There was no bloody force in hell that he would get another one; that was enough to turn him off for good.

Poor Ismail, he suffered what is today known as post-traumatic stress disorder, but who knew then of this new illness with the fancy name? In the later years of his life, lady luck smiled at him when he was offered a job in Germany, as a guest worker[30]; although it wasn't until his late 50s, he managed to get this position. He had some friends who were in charge of the list, so the blind eye was turned on, and there he was in Deutschland. Being the oldest worker, his talent for reciting poems did bring lots of attention, but in terms of work: as far as work is concerned, the Germans would ignore him. Once he got in one of the mini-buses

[30] Gasterarbeiter: "A guest/foreign worker" in German.

with his dirty boots, the supervisor got mad at him;

"You bloody "Sweinhund"[31]

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes! You are not only dirty, but an old bastard as well."

This barrage of words left Ismail in a very unfaltering position. He was red, and the rage overtook him…

"Listen you, do you speak Italian"?

"No! What has this to do with anything?"

"Do you speak Greek or Slavic"?

'What the hell are you talking about?"

The supervisor was getting out of his comfort zone. Usually the workers obey, but this old dog had some new tricks in his bag.

"So, you can't speak any language at all? Then you are a bloody thousand times bigger swine than me."

Since that day, the German supervisor would not touch Ismail. On the contrary, he felt that Ismail was not like the rest of them, so he always got him some easy jobs to do. He would wear this elegant "Borsalino" type of hat; he was very superficial and being bold made him paranoid.

[31] Sweinhund: "A pig; a filthy pig" in German.

"Boldness is a sickness", he would say to us, and like this, he went until the end of his days.

As kids, we were afraid of him and his big eyes would scare us. We thought that his eyes were following us everywhere; even when we played peek-a-boo, his eyes were omnipresent.[32]

Autumn! Memories, full of joy so nostalgic bring them back to Ulqin. A season of rain would always bring back the "Gypsies" with their umbrella-fixing kit.

Uncle Mali was different; he would not bother with the "Gypsies", the masters of the trade to even contemplate fixing his broken umbrella. Gypsies would be out of their job if it was for our uncle's business. Instead, he would grab his umbrellas and fix them himself. As kids, we would see his struggle achieving this, as he was not known as a good handyman. When he would come out on his front porch, we would imitate the "Gypsies" and imitate the cry to fix the umbrella. All of the neighbourhood from alley to alley would shout, calling on customers to bring their broken umbrellas.

"Anyone need their umbrellas fixed?

We fix umbrella'umbrellaumbrella'umbrellaumbrella'umbrellaumbrella'umbrella'."

He would put his head down, pretending he couldn't hear us. We thought that he had trouble hearing us but to no avail; he would not raise his head, ignoring the bullying behaviour. Then we assumed that he was deaf, so let's do this in two voices. If I was mono, for a second time, we would send our appeal in stereo. Little did we know that this was enough to send him "Bananas"[33]. He looked at us and delivered one of his lectures.

"You are making fun of me, you sons of a gun. It is still easy for

[32] Omnipresent as though Big-Brother was watching.

[33] Bananas: Loco.

you because your mother Najia is still buying things for you. One day, when you grow up and have your own buying power, then you will see."

We should have seen this coming. An old Albanian proverb says, "Leave the old Man in its Own Glory."

With Uncle Mali, we have lots of fond memories; some lost, some rediscovered again. He had an authoritative presence, and our houses were joined together. When the only son of Uncle Mali, Ganni, went to visit his father in Germany, he would bring us these huge presents of big red trucks. For all the kids in the neighbourhood, this was simply a hit item to have, and we would rent them to the rest of the kids for five cents each; entrepreneurship was in our blood.

Before he got married, Ganni would terrify us with horror stories from American movies; "Black cars with tinted windows are killing the young girls."

Even today, we do not understand why Ganni would do this to us. When Uncle Mali would visit us on rare occasions, he had two replica cowboy guns for us.[34] Even today, we can smell the gunpowder in our nostrils as some culinary experience, and not as simple toys for boys.

The women of the street would, in most cases, fall for his charms, and they would leave to go home, with their faces covered in red with blushes of pleasure. We didn't know about little Uncle Mali's, mischievous philandering.

As kids, we would watch the TV at his home. This was the time for us to sit down on the floor, not on the couches because that was a no-go zone.[35] If we accidentally farted, that would trigger the punishment. Being a twin, he would stand us up in order to smell our bottom to make sure who the real perpetrator was.

In those days, he would go from one point to another in town, hunting for bargains. I guess this made him a super bargain hunter. At

[34] Cowboy guns were the presents of our dreams.

[35] The couches were a no-go zone because they were too expensive.

the end of his days, he was asthmatic, always puffing his way through the steps of narrow streets. On one of his last visits to his village of Milla, while enjoying the hospitality of the women reciting his famous poetries, he died on the spot. A heart attack was the culprit. May his soul rest in peace.

Everyone in a family has one Aunty that even their own children called her, simply "Aunty Aisha". She was a wife to uncle Mali but also the sister of my grandmother Zoorayah. For my grandmother, this was a curse, not a blessing. Two sisters married to two brothers! This history would repeat itself. If only we knew…some things may have turned differently.

When her nephew, Haji would come for dinner, this alerted a panic button as Haji was known as a big eater, a man with a huge appetite. First order of the service and the aunty would bring this hot "Halva"[36], so hot that you had to wait for it to cool down before you could have a first bite.

But Haj would devour the first half like there was no tomorrow…

"What's wrong Haj, can't you eat any more?"

"My dear Aunty, I'm only waiting to cool down! My stomach is like a broken car door, so you have to push twice till it closes."

After many years, in her old age, she would suffer stroke with some sad consequences as her speech was gone. The mean neighbourhood so-called ladies would whisper to her, "Go and die, so you can ease the family from a burden to keep you."

How nasty, but she would mutter the same words many years back to our maternal grand-mother Fe-reede.

Fe-reede would answer, "My dear A'isha, we are not in charge of our destinies, only God Almighty is and from the living soul, there is always a hope."

[36] Halva: Slightly gelatinous and made from grain flour butter and sugar.

"Burn Shasi, Burn"

As the oldest kid in the Rama family, Flamuri would despise his Aunty Aisha due to unsavoury memories that he never shared with us. When he turned ten, it was time for Flamur to be sent as a farm hand to his mother's village of ancient Shas, now absolutely deserted. In old medieval times, this place flourished as an epicentre of culture, art, and music.

A Franciscan monk, Marin Bizzi, who chronicled this time in 1610, would describe old Shas; it had as many churches as days in the year, all in Gothic style. Old "Svacium", as he was known throughout the antiquity, still holds the mysteries of the past in its deep-water lake, of the same name uninterrupted in years, waiting to be rediscovered.

When we mentioned to our other aunty of Flamur, Xhija, then in her mid-seventies, that we were writing the histories of the ancient Shas, she suddenly perked herself from the afternoon slumber and asked us,

"Did you go to the Big Church?"

"Yes, yes!" I did not know how to put it to her but she insisted, "My dear kids, when I got lost once as a ten year old child tending after my flock, I saw a young girl all in white combing her long dark hair. My body froze; I was stunned. I have no recollection what happened after that."

Poor Aunty, she was comatose for about seven weeks as she was bewitched, but in the end, she survived to tell the tale. We do believe in the unseen world after all.

Muyo Tagani, the maternal uncle of Flamur, was making him work from dawn till dusk for a paltry price of bread. Working in inhu-

mane conditions, in the swamp of Shas Lake, full of mosquitos without food or water. This was his thank you note; that his uncle was showing his gratitude.

Our father would in many years to come still curse his uncle Muya for this kind of treatment. The promise of the uncle was that, after all that hard work, he would buy him a brand-new suite. This empty promise never materialised, so the "promise is the fool's happiness."

Flamuri was deeply hurt. "Uncle Muya lied to me, as I never grew as tall as I should. He stunted my growth, damn him!"

He would complain to his mother Zoorayah. Interestingly enough, even Uncle Muya was the only male heir in his rich family, and he died young from an incurable illness[37]…

[37] It is an old saying of Alexander the Great of Macedonia that his dying wish when they buried him was that his arms and feet be left out of the grave so the whole world would see that he does not take anything with him when he is dead.

Hard Manual Labour

Let's turn back again to our father, Flamur; by now, a bit more grown up, but still with the same mentality of a loser, used to a nightlife of gambling his life away from the downtrodden bars that smell of piss and low lives or, as mother Zoorayah, who virtually adored him as king pin of all the rest of the siblings, would often exclaim in her exuberance;

"Flamur, above everybody else, the rest of the siblings in other side."

At this time, Flamur was trying to avoid any link with the reality that surrounded him as a plague, more of a curse. For him to take the reins of a family life was a strange notion as the eldest of the siblings had a priority in the hierarchy of Jamal.

Being encompassed, almost strangled by the responsibility he was feeling, the mere oxygen that he was breathing became a heavy burden that needed to be rectified. He wanted a way out.

The little town of Ulqin had nothing more to offer him as would some friends from southern Albania that migrated early in the beginning of the twentieth century with the heavy heart say,

"This place is giving up his soul, it is a curse that pirates of old have bestowed on us."

Flamur was becoming yesterday's man in his own backyard…The doors that were previously open were now shut in his face.

Grandfather Jamal would take him on his trips, making a hard living as a manual labourer in Dalmatia, the city port of Rijeka, today in Croatia.

He kept trying various jobs as a salt picker, harvesting the famous Ulqin Sea salt. Today, the salt lakes stay unattended; another transition gone bad. Even hospitality jobs were nothing strange to him, honing his skills at the hotel "Galeb" with the first generation of proper trained waiters. He was well liked in the group of friends that cherished his wit and humour.

Having a short attention span with a short-fused temper would eventually land him in hot water as his poor grandmother A'leme reminded him time and time again;

"The devil never rests with this boy."

At that time, in order to strengthen the boy's character, my grandfather[38], due to his personal connections, pulled some strings to get Flamur into the national army.[39]

"The Army would make him a man." Jamal would yell at my poor grandmother, but there was no other way for my boy to learn his lesson.

JNA[39] was compulsory military service lasting two years in which Albanians were treated as a "persona non grata", the unwanted ones.

Being an Albanian, the army was comprised of mainly southern Slavs.[40] It meant constant harassment and, in some cases, even torture. That was the price to pay and the lesson to learn; that was the right idea … Not with our father, he drew a lucky straw as his duty at the army and was given the role of a telecommunications officer.

He did use that post to his benefit, often coming back to Ulqin to the surprise of many, as this was a quite unusual occurrence.

[38] Grandfather was Don-Quixotesque in his stature.
[39] JNA: Yugoslav National Army.
[40] Southern Slavs are otherwise known as Yugoslavs.

Being stationed in city of Split, the Dalmatian coastline was so close to the shores of "Bella Italia", and with Italy in his sight, he would ponder his escape sooner than later.

Travelling back and forth one day in the ferry carrying some young economy students, he tried to chit chat with them, and as he started flirting with them, unbeknown to him, he started bragging about his studies in the economy.

"Oh, that's so nice; we are in the same course."

As an old saying goes, "that a lie has a short lifespan and a long memory".

Embarrassed to say the least, instead of a six-hour journey of pleasure, it turned into a nightmare. For the rest of the trip, he had to hide in the dinghy, freezing his ass off.

Interesting fact; to this day, the port city of Ulqin, as one of the oldest ports in the Adriatic Sea, has not got the right of berthing of any kind, so although at sea, it feels isolated and alone.

On the lookout for a bride to be

Upon his return from the army, Jamal was of an opinion that the time has come for Flamur to get married. Being the golden boy, the older of the siblings for our family, the question remained: is there any girl that can fulfil the high expectation my grandmother Zoorayah has set her sights on?

The first criteria was fairly simple. She had to be of peasant stock, high cheek bones, well built, highlander and above to come from a respectful family. On one of her trips back to her neck of the woods, suddenly without warning, she noticed Najee, walking.

"Who is this lovely girl?" She murmured under her breath to her companion in the vicinity.

"Oh, Zoorayah! She is the only daughter, of Malik Lan Suma."

Grandmother started to pretty much solve a little puzzle that had been coming to her mind. Call this providence, but this was not a co-incidence.

During the Second World War, the Suma tribe had sheltered my grandfathers during the most oppressive times where the Yugoslav communists tried to capture them as enemies of state. As the word got out that my father was the person in question asking for the hand of our mother Najee, the first cracks in her family started to show, mainly from our mother's granny.

"That family spells trouble; they are still on the 'blood feud'. I can't let my only granddaughter become the bride in the Rama household."

The word "never" did not exist in the vocabulary of the Rama clan. They were set on getting Najee, as other alternatives would not show in horizon. So, who we are going to get to fulfil this grand task of arranging this engagement and be a go-between?

The brothers Rama were pondering till late at night with nowhere near to find this "Lucky" candidate, this mission impossible, knowing full well the resentment of the Suma tribe.

"We may have found the right person, yes!" Shab, the older uncle, was touching his moustache in anticipation.

"Say it! Damn you." Jamal was losing his patience.

"-It's gonna be her first cousin, Ibrahim!"

"Brother, you hit the nail right on the head."

1957, the archeological excavations under the renowned professor, Pavle Mijovic took place in the old city of Ulqin.

Ibrahim, Jamal, and Shab were part of the men for hire, as they would dig the treasures buried under the centuries of dust to be rediscovered.

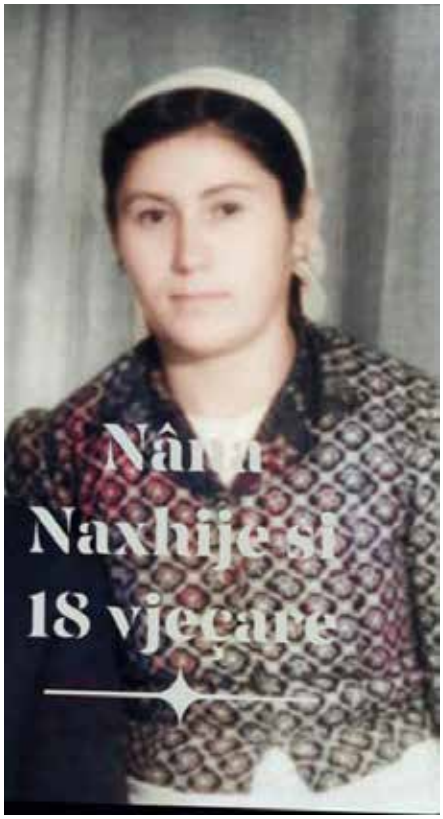
The altar of Artemis, the goddess of hunting[41], was one of the major discoveries found there. Magnificently crafted by master stonemasons from the ancient Epirus, as Albania was known throughout the Middle Ages; it was a sight to behold.

As he was digging, the trove of the new documents came to light. Pavle was faced with a huge dilemma. Due to lack of knowledge of the Albanian language, transcribing the manuscripts became an impossible task. Many of these manuscripts never saw the light of the day due to the regime in Belgrade. His voluminous and complete work regarding

[41] The deer and the cypress were sacred to Artemis, the goddess of hunting.

the history of Ulqin was never published; it simply vanished.

To this day, this undoubtedly very important city that belonged to the republic of Venice, known by the Latin name "Albania Veneto", was never truly studied by Albanian scholars.



In this environment, Brahim[42] would become the go between of the Rama brothers to secure the hand of Najee.

"So, my dear brother Shaban, you are the real gunner!"

"Brother, there is no better lad that we could find, so let's roll a cigarette for this occasion."

Brahim was feeling very uncomfortable. He was being trapped in his own skin, an uneasy situation as the Rama Brothers were showering him with a table full of food. At this point, he was oblivious to why he had been summoned to this kind of hospitality…little did he know.

"So, all this hospitality, just for me? I don't think I am worthy of it."

"Yes, dear brother. There is this little duty we have come to summon you to finish for us!"

"So, what are you saying?"

Shab did not wait for him to finish his sentence and went right

[42] Brahim had golden teeth.

to the point. "That cousin of yours, a little precious girl; I may call her even a woman now…"

"Yes! We are talking for the daughter of Malik for that rascal of ours Flamur, for her hand in marriage."

"No way! There is not even a slightest chance I can accept this duty."

Shab, without any warning, very cool headed as he was used in his previous endeavours.[43]

A gun in the hand spoke more than a thousand words.

Suddenly, Shab made his intention very clear. The shiny gun was put on the table just as a reminder that Brahim did not have a choice in the matter. He will simply follow orders.

"Ibrahim, I think we have an understanding!"

Brahim was put in front of "fait accompli"[44] done business.

Many years after this deed, Uncle Brahim was torn with the guilt of his deed and as cancer was eating his health away, he came to visit us to try to clear his conscience. He had a confession to make …

"My dear boys, Naim & Sami, there is something I came to ask from you two today. I need your "hallall."[45]

Dear Uncle, that's the way it was meant to be…we did forgive him though, as that was a dying wish of a man.

Our grandfather's creed would echo, "Ashes of a good fire keep the heat longer."

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[43] There is a story of bride stealing. Even our grandmother Zoorayah was simply taken as a runaway bride, much to her parents' dislike. In this case, she did not run; she was simply taken from her arranged wedding onto the lap of my grandfather who fancied her. Before modern times, free choice was never a word of the day.
[44] Fait accompli: Something that is done, irreversible and final.
[45] Hallall: Muslim religious blessing.

The women under the Albanian law[46] are considered as "a sack for carrying things". The woman was in her husband's house to bear his children.

The wedding was a great chance for the brothers' Rama to redeem themselves, as this occasion was the first major happiness in the family after many years of hardship. Still, the lingering question remained about the invitation list. As the list was getting longer, the financial means were not as generous as in the old days, except for some sweets. There were no monetary gifts of any kind, so Shab simply cut the list short by reasoning that even if they invite the whole city to the wedding, some people would still be whining and whining, so in the end, apart from immediate family and relations, the other list was thrown away.

[46] The Albanian law is also known as The Kanun.

The Mountain of Suma

The bride grew up in the small mountainous village of Suma. She had to wait for four years to finally get a green light from the groom at the age of nineteen, that they are ready for the proceedings. The Suma village and the mountain of the same name, apart from being totally inaccessible by normal road, the mountain itself looked like a giant pyramid right in the middle of Ana e Malit region; it bore the name of a blacksmith. Today, it is simply known by the name of Suma.

Grandfather Malik would often describe how his grandfather Selman came as an orphan into this mountain, and as for his great-grandfather's whereabouts, he did not know.

It was also known as the residence of the medieval prince known by the name John Dioclea. Because he was such a peaceful ruler, the Slavs, nicknamed him "Vladimir". Legend has it that while John was taken prisoner by Bulgarian king Samuel, he prayed day and night, and an angel of the Lord "malakh"[47] appeared to him and foretold that he would shortly be freed, but that he would die a martyr's death. The king's daughter noticed John.

"It came to pass that Samuel's daughter, Cossara, was animated and inspired by a beatific soul. She approached her father and begged that she might go down with her maids and wash the head and feet of the chained captives. Her father granted her wish, so she descended and

[47] Malakh: "Angel" in Judaism.

carried out her good work. Noticing John among the prisoners, she was struck by his handsome appearance, his humility, gentleness and modesty, and the fact that he was full of wisdom and knowledge of the Lord. She stopped to talk to him, and to her, his speech seemed sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

In 1016, he was beheaded while praying in the church by the opposing king in a treacherous move. Shortly after his death, he was recognised as a martyr and saint known by Albanians as "Shën Gjon". His tomb is in the city of Elbasan, today in Albania; it's still venerated by Christians and Muslims alike.

Near Suma is another intriguing place, the only remaining Albanian Catholic habitat. As the meaning of word Catholic is "universal", it must be said that this applies to the village by the name of Lula. What makes this so universal is that the name is a woman's name, Lula-Flower.

How it came about is the history our grandfather Malik. He wanted us to tell as a token of this mountain heroine by name of Lula…let the story of Lula begin!

As Lula was about to be married in the mare symbolism, she was about, and as a token of goodwill, she placed two woven fabric scarfs

side by side; one made from linen, another from weaver's broom, at the spring of the name, "Given to the priest."

Unbeknown to her, she was being followed by two thieves that had Lula in their sight as an easy prey. Little did they know. Being suddenly confronted did shake Lula, as the thieves had started to make their way towards her. A scuffle was about to begin, and as Lula was defending her life and her honour, the thieves tried to break her down but to no avail. Lula was holding on for her dear life. She managed to grab a sickle, and in the struggle, she cut the arm of one of the attackers and the head of the second one, dead in a pool of blood.

The news of this unprovoked attack reached the Turkish Pasha in Scutari. The killer must be punished; that's the law of the land, "but who is the culprit?" Lula felt tremendous guilt, feeling ashamed as she stepped forward in front of a Pasha!

"It is me your Excellency, I did it defending my honour and my property!"

"Release her immediately! She is forgiven and may her offspring be blessed from now on."

From that time, this tribe and village was known by the name of Lula.

An offshoot of this tribe is in the city of Ulqin, truly an honourable family indeed. The main cape in Ulqin is known as the cape of Suma, and in old times, prior to Montenegro annexing the place in 1880, it belonged to the Suma family with the house that was beautiful with Venetian style windows and Ottoman feel. It was a sight to behold.

As the new king Nicholas of Montenegro looked for a house, while being scared of an attack, he usurped the house, expelling the owner that put the curse on the place.

Oddly enough, today in this cape that did hold a magnificent hotel built in 1937, the devastating earthquake of 1979 totally destroyed the hotel. Today, it's an empty parking lot that stays proudly overlooking the old town as by magic, waiting for better days and the curse of Suma to be lifted away.

Mashallah, Mashallah

Let's get back to the story of our mother, where she was moulded into the woman that she became.

The spring water of the Suma, the mountain air is what makes this dwelling so enticing and unique. With its ubiquitous panoramic vista, it challenged even the nearby Milla village in its unspoiled landscape and beauty.

There is an old saying, "The Oak tree girl to be." Najee, the only daughter of Malik and Feride, was getting ready for her big day. The engagement had lasted for four long years. Talking, even just mentioning the name of her future husband in whispers was not allowed, as it was considered a sin against the good name of the family.

In her mind, the days of hard toiling were gone, especially for a country girl rejoicing that her menial tasks as "my move to the city not needing to milk the cows and sheep, that's over."

Only if she knew who Flamur was. The code of honour, "The Kanun"[48] treats women as leftovers ready to procrastinate, and as such, her voice was to be silenced.

Her faith had been sealed the day she was born. The nuptial party from the city was left in disbelief, those trips outside Ulqin were an unheard thing. As the wedding party was gathering pace, this lot had never been to the mountain village before; there is a first for everybody

anyway…On the glorious September day of 1963, the sun was shining.

Enough, brother Naim, of poetry; let's get to the story, shall we?

The bride was on the top of the horse, covered in a black head veil, not showing her face in full white makeup - very "geisha" like.

The horse on which she was mounted like a doll was in ornaments of a different kind, little mirrors thwarting the "mal-ochio"48, singing with the melodic music of tambourines and harmonica; the drums were heralding the arrival of the new bride echoing in unison.

"Oh, how beautiful the bride is now Mashallah, Mashallah."[49]

Tradition stated that the wedding party as soon as the bride is in, they turf the gun fire; the signal that the bride is finally ours… "It's ours, it's ours." It was echoing in the mountaintop of Suma. The bride was almost home…new home.

[48] Mal-ochio: "Evil-Eye" in Italian.
[49] Mashallah: "God has willed it" in Arabic.

In order to get the bride's dowry, Jamal has to renegotiate this ritual with the young kid; usually part of the family's inner circle, that is put there to protect its contents but not without the price. Bargaining, and in many instances the heckling, the kid steps up to the role. In his naivety, he even tries to outwit the old wolf Jamal. As the price keeps getting higher till the satisfaction is mutual, then the kid keeps spruikers face for the price till both parties are satisfied. And then after much tension and hoopla, he relinquishes the dowry with this big smile while the onlookers keep praising his negotiating skills.

Jamal and Shab, the proud Rama brothers, achieved the coup marrying the rascal, the prodigal son who returned from army service[50], now stepping into a new life of a married man.

Entering the new home to be, she had to follow the tradition that is still entrenched into the Albanian psyche. Upon entering the main door, my grandmother had to dip her right hand in honey and then in an almost circular motion, bless all corners of the entrance. Then, with her right foot, upon entering the house, she passed an obstacle in the form of a small pillow, breaking in the way a small mirror and the entire time, keeping her gaze down as it was shameful to open her eyes.

And finally, as she entered the room, a stranger in the dark crawled upon her unsuspected soul…from the corner of her eye, she could see a silhouette of a man under the protection of a veil.

She dared to look. "Mary! Mother of Jesus, this cannot be my man."

She had to utter the only word that she was allowed to say: "O, Thou Human Being."

The words almost stuck in her throat from the shock of the moment, seeing for the first time her husband to be…Little did she know that was our uncle Kadri who was fooling around.

[50] Army Service lasted two years.

Many years later, my mother would always retell this story as such a sight, a relief…and laughter.

The "nuse" bride was sitting in her bridal chair, and plonked in her lap was a little boy. She had to kiss his hand three times.[51] Feminism in Ulqin in the early sixties was science fiction of the highest order, and unfortunately, nothing has much changed to this day.

Although Latin is not the strong point of my family or any family in fact, one word sums up what is expected from the new bride; "Virgo Intacta".[52] That is the highest order of chastity. The moment the girl is born, the family puts a bullet under the child's pillow as a reminder that one day as she grows into a young woman, the honour of the family is paramount, and if broken, only the bullet will be able to recompense.

[51] Having boys as offsprings is sacred.
[52] Virgo Intacta: "Untouched virgin" in Latin.

Poisoned Soul

The sixties were troublesome times with many upheavals. Ulqin was slowly turning from a sleepy little town stuck in its past to an awakening giant of tourism. It was becoming more of a tourist Mecca, bourgeoning into a place of leisure and fun for the cheap working-class clientele.

The national awakening of Albanians was starting to take place. But it did not last long as nationalistic forces within the Yugoslav regime led by UDBA.[28]

The secret service started the mass expulsion of Albanians in Kosovo, which at that time, was struggling as the most undeveloped province within the state. It became clear that the trickle effect would be felt even in Ulqin, although, on the other end of the country, it would still mobilise the system just by being Albanian; it would push the panic button of Tito's Yugoslavia.

With each passing day, Flamur's mind was becoming set on moving away from all this trouble that was now coming closer to home.

Mother Zoorayah noticed this change and would say to him, "My dear boy, your ass is itchy like it's full of worms. Don't you realise that you just got married, tempting fate is not wise."

The destiny started to smile on my father's face as my Uncle Shaban had escaped in the late 1950s to Australia, and that seemed like a swell idea.

"Latina", a suburb outside Rome became a synonym for these early

migrants as they would wait for the visa; some of them years on end. Most of these young migrants would choose America as "Terra Promesa"[53], but for my Uncle Shaban, the Promised Land would be "Terra Australis"[54], down under. As far as he could get, the better it would be.

Just married, he felt sick to his stomach to ask his new brother-in-law to somehow become his guarantor, so he could make his way out as well. That was a Sisyphean task, a mind set in stone, to go and leave the old ways behind, for the greener pastures of an unknown land promised a better future. He was risking his life on this bet, and this gambler at heart felt the adrenalin pumping that made things seem so easy. Little did my uncle know that this would open a "Pandora's box" for Jamal's family in general.

Finally, at long last the guarantee to invite his brother-in-law came, and Flamur was over the moon with feelings of joy and trepidation at the same time. Convincing the old man was a different matter altogether. Jamal was pinning all his hopes on his older son, but now, facing the prospect of losing him became daunting and terrifying at the same time.

[53] Terra Promessa: "The Promised Land" in Italian.
[54] Terra Australis: "Southern Land" in Latin.

"Australia is way too far, my boy; they still have cannibals down there!"

Flamur pretended that he was listening, but it was more selective hearing as Jamal may have spoken to a wall. His misadventure while job seeking in Switzerland was forgotten, his pride and ego untouched. At the same time in neighbouring Albania, to get a simple pass from one village to the next place required a special pass. If by God's mercy, you were caught escaping the country, long-term jail and even death awaited you in Enver Hodza's[55] communist Albania.

Being offered a seasonal job on a Swiss farm, milking cows and earning a decent wage was not enough. He refused to work as a farm hand[56], and was kicked out of the country quick smart.

He was a dreamer, influenced by the golden age of Hollywood. His favourite pastime time of his youth, apart from playing cards, would be spending all day long at the local garden cinema[57], together with his buddy, Hilmi.

Johnny Weissmuller's iconic "Tarzan" was a hit of the day, but even that movie was far too complicated for our father to comprehend. So poor Hilmi would be his translator, always available to explain the ending of a picture, spoiling his fun of watching.

Many years back, while poor Hill was on his deathbed, Hilmi, his childhood friend next to him, had one more wish for him, a special request.

"Please Flamur, just talk to me in English, just like Johnny did?"

As pangs of death would come to claim his soul, just for that tantalising moment, Hollywood returned to Hill in his room. He passed away in peace, smiling just like in movies.

[55] Enver Hoxha was an Albanian long-serving dictator.
[56] I wish Flamur had an idea what backpackers do in Aussie farms.
[57] The local garden cinema is no more.

A Mother's Tears of Sorrow

Mother Zoorayah[58] was devastated that her eldest son on whom she pinned all her hopes, would leave the family home. All her pleading, her sobering cry would come to no avail. Flamur was about to embark on the trip, and his mother knew, deep in her heart, that she would never see him again.

"Flamur, my dearest beacon of my soul, don't do this to me? Ulqin is as good as Australia. Here is your land, your ancestral home; there is simply no need for you to move away."

As she talked, she would spit rapidly in order to ward off the evil eye.

With her hands at his chest, she started kissing his hands as the premonition of the mother is higher than anything else. She had to let him go with her heavy heart.

Mother Najee, dressed in red, would work in the field that Jamal purchased on the outskirts of the city as it provided an extra income. One day, while working in the field, a bull started approaching without warning. The red dress initiated a reaction from the bull, and that full rampaging bull almost killed the new bride while her husband was busy getting ready to leave. I guess Mum had never seen a raging bull fighting[59] in the arenas of Spain, to understand that the rage in a bull's eye was caused by a traditional red dress, that the new bride had to wear as

[58] Mother Zoorayah was a little lady, small in stature, with a round face and a white headscarf resembling a Piroshki doll.

[59] Corridā: Bullfight.

per custom, but she did survive to tell the tale.

The wheel of fortune for Flamur's imminent departure was causing havoc within the family but to some, the drums of joy were more of the way to celebrate than feel sorry. Nonetheless, his younger sisters, Gulia and Sultana, had reason to feel exuberant as their older brother was more of an oppressor and tyrant than a loving sibling.

"Flamur will be gone. Fly away from home, freedom here we come."

Mum was looking at them, not knowing what to do. She joined them but not in singing as her heart was aching, but as she pretended to break a smile, she was a mere spectator, trying to mingle with her sister in laws. As Flamur entered the house, he overheard the singing of joy.

"Is it your wish, you dumb sluts, for me to just leave?"

He started yelling at the top of his lungs, slapping them at the same time with the ferocity of the same bull, but now in human form ravishing through the room. In this commotion, our innocent mother copped the beating as well.

As an old saying goes, "If you cannot hit the donkey, you hit the saddle."

Alarmed to the least with the excesses his son was causing, Jamal started losing his patience. He started to resemble his grandfather Ram in his behaviour more than the son he thought he knew. Being bitten by the snake is not an easy thing. As he was lying in his sick bed, he knew that this was a bad omen. Still, not wanting to spoil his son's party, he kept his mouth shut.

He could hardly talk as the poison weakened his body, and his soul was poisoned by his departure. He only had enough strength to just usher one word; "May the rats sink a ship you are about to embark."

With these ominous words, the father fare-welled his son. It was not a blessing the father hoped for, more of a curse that would follow him for many years to come.

The Accursed Ship

1965.

The unease that November day Flamur was feeling in the top deck of the ship that was sailing towards down under was a heavy burden to bear. Motion sickness was causing havoc to many eastern European travellers/migrants, but to him, it was just a walk in the park as he was used to the sea.

There was something more that was trickling his mind as he was fast pacing in his mind a picture of dad lying in his bed uttering the ominous curse, "May the rats sink the ship you are on." It was a month-long trip that would challenge the durability and stamina of any person.

He did find some Hungarian, migrant girls so easy on the eye who made the separation from his new wife somehow easier to bear. He tried to befriend them as the trip was long and arduous. That's what Captain Cook found in 1770 when he landed on the south-eastern coast of Australia. I don't know, but legend has it that when he asked the local Aboriginal people, they called it a kangaroo; they did answer him "ganga-ruuu" which, in local slang, actually meant that they didn't have a clue.

He landed in Melbourne at the height of the White Australia policy which effectively barred people of non-European descent from immigrating to Australia. The port of Geelong was very lively place at that time. He was faced with the new language, not English per-se, as the majority of the new arrivals would be called in later stages; "New Australians."[60]

[60] New Australians: An Australian term for new immigrants.

Greek, Italian, Polish, Yugoslav was the mixture of the day. Flamur did not feel like a fish in the water anymore; he felt a mare spectator in the conglomerate of many nations, a fish in the pond maybe. Australia was in dire need of new blood after the Second World War, ravaged many towns and places across this vast continent. It was simply dissipated by the immense loss of young people who never come back from war.

History had not been kind to this big island in the southern hemisphere. Discovered by Dutch explorers in 1600, known as "Niewuw Holland", New Holland, this newly discovered southern land "Terra Australis"[54] was finally claimed by the British in 1788. It was initially established as a penal colony, and it has forsaken the first Australians to the point of extinction. 70,000 years of uninterrupted history were ignored, and the first Australians were assimilated and called by a new name - Aborigines. The indigenous people of Australia do not even figure in the constitution of the country.

Transformation from a penal colony to the welcoming country of these newly arrived migrants had a significant difference for these so-called "new Australians". They were coming without the shackles of cold iron, seemingly free, but now hostages of their own deeds.

Being a city snob, although from a little town like Ulqin, Flamur was bewildered that the majority of his countryman background was from the rural parts that he despised as it would remind him of his own humbler background. In many instances, he would treat them with contempt, mocking the wayward thinking of his countryman.

"If they make one dollar, I will surpass them by a thousand!"

We beg to differ! This simple man of good peasant stock would work hard, and at the end of the day, make something of the hard work. Never fully integrated, dreaming of a return to homeland, in the end, he just became a statistic of the state. Our dear rascal had envisaged a different life. "Easy come, easy go" did not apply in his case as the days that his beloved father and uncle would chip in and cover his misdemeanours

were long gone.

In years to come, he would work in harsh conditions to earn good money but spent beyond his means. While he would look at his countrymen with despise, they had started to prosper and put their life in order while he was still at the year zero.

Uncle Sam, by this time, had started making good money, as he was part of the newly acquired work force to build the largest engineering project up to date - the Snowy Mountains Scheme[61] that was mainly constructed by immigrants.

Our uncle was adamant that Flamur should not ignore his sister anymore, and by this time, Flamur had become Freddy. This was a normal occurrence, Paolo became Paul, Shaban, Sam, Giovani, John. Anglicising the names in English was the first order of the day; the rest was learning the Australian culture that in the process completely obliterated the "first nations."[62]

As he was working in inhumane conditions that today would be closed down, Freddy was accidentally nudged in the shoulder by a fellow worker as he was walking down the workers' enclosure.

[61] The Snowy Mountain Scheme is the largest hydroelectricity project in Australia; it was mainly constructed by immigrants.
[62] First nations: Australian indigenous people.

"Sorry mate!"

"What!" He exclaimed, as the man continued walking. Freddy, grabbed the poor guy, and he punched the daylights out of him. A simple apology was not good enough as Freddy was still in his Balkan frame of mind.

"Freddy, you simply have to obey the rules mate!"

But the rules were meant to be broken, so Freddy's, ego and false pride got the better of him.

1966.

The Spartan life was starting to take its toll. Mum's imminent departure was a warning light for a change of direction to become a better man. The little bus station near the small beach was full of well-wishers that had come to farewell Najee. She was going to reacquaint with her husband whom she barely knew.

O tempora o mores![63]

As the family gathered, the old photograph of the day depicted no smiles as they looked grim. The faint smiles facade could have been a premonition that this might not change Freddy, but my mum's life would be thrown upside down.

Mum's arrival was met with a cold shoulder as Flamur had to be a provider, but that was such a strange notion that for our dad, was a hard pill to swallow. From a carefree person to the guy that had to take care of a new wife, that was as bitter as the pint of "Victoria bitter" beer he was sculling down. The wage he was earning would dissipate in the

[63] O tempora o mores!: "Oh what times!" in Latin.

clouds of Melbourne, grey as grim as it can be. Mum started to worry and ask herself, is this the man she married or a mere figment of her imagination? The reality started to bite.

The excuses started to mount as the debts kept stacking, hidden in plain sight the agony of being totally broke, to all the rest, an idyllic relationship. Being in love, seeing is believing, she would tend to his needs as an obedient wife, ready for sacrifice and if that meant enduring an occasional slap, so be it. Domestic violence in those days was a hidden epidemic.[64] False pride, mixed with being self-indulgent into the belief that he can do no wrong, empty talk associated with an occasional love song, with promises as the only thing left. As the old saying goes, "The tongue is made of flesh; it chews everything."

[64] Nothing has changed about domestic violence to this day.

"Where is Your Hubby, Najee?"

"Where is your hubby, Najee?"— The question on everybody's lips, but what does a woman who just arrived have to do with the whereabouts of her husband who was gone days on end without notice?

It was not a conventional relationship; she was the product of her upbringing, and no questions were asked. In many instances, she would be too embarrassed to admit to any visitors that it had been days on end that she'd seen her husband.

Indeed, on rare occasions that he was back, he was usually dropped off by an unknown man, as drunk card in the doorstep where he was cursing the heavens and earth for his self-inflicted misfortune.

Living in Melbourne, the most diverse and cultured city in Australia, the capital state of Victoria, with its many laneways had its charms and traps. Immigrants would settle near the factories that were usually near Port Melbourne, St. Kilda, South Melbourne, Albert Park. The embodiment of the transformation, Post war. Greeks, Jews, Italians, Yugoslavs. We wogs[65] and dagos[66]

[65] Wogs: A derogatory ethnic slur used to describe a foreigner or immigrant from southern Europe.
[66] Dagos: An ethnic slur used to refer to an Italian-speaking person.

came here in search of new lives worked in factories, and set up small businesses. They brought with them song-lines from distant lands. In those days, this housing style from a bygone Victorian era was still alive and well, and the houses were designed to accommodate one family. Nonetheless, the migrants from southeast Europe soon changed all that.

Oddly enough, this squatter-like housing 30 years later became very affluent suburbs with million-dollar properties enjoyed today by those offspring of those poor uneducated migrants.

Conditions were not great, and the pay was small, so many of the families would start intermingling with each other and share the same house. This was a case in point for our parents as well. They started sharing this family house with Greek speaking migrants from Cyprus.

By that time, Freddy had become fluent in the Greek language, all those nights playing cards. The "Open-Manila" poker game, at least left him one long life legacy of knowing Greek in the city that was by that time the largest Greek speaking city after Athens. With his growing gambling debts, the tight knit small community of Albanians from Montenegro, were starting to talk gossip and spread rumours of his philandering ways that were not a figment of the imagination.

Mum's accident at the biscuit factory in Port Melbourne was a gift sent from heaven, as here was the chance to start anew and escape again the misery of his own deeds.

Being compensated for almost losing her hand, Mum was happy to hand all the money to her husband as she hoped that he would send some back home to his parents as well.

Boy! Did he cherish the thought! Overnight, Mum had to pack her belongings. Going to Sydney, that is almost 900 km north of Melbourne, would be the best chance to come clean and forget his old ways, so he thought.

He was a charmer, so Mum was heavy-hearted to leave without

a proper goodbye. They didn't inform anyone as Freddy was heavily indebted to countless persons. This was a very hush-hush move in the dead of night.

1969.

Coming to big old Sydney was supposed to change things for the better. With the onset that my Uncle Sam had already established, he at least felt that he might have a chance of proving to Najee that he could change. They settled in the suburb of Drummoyne, Inner West of Sydney. Living with our dad's cousin, Beyaze proved a little bit of respite for mum.

The house was quite large near the shore, and three families started sharing this place.

Mum's life was about to go in a different direction. She started feeling unwell. Morning sickness had become hard to handle, and she started vomiting. Good old Beyaze realised that Najee was pregnant, not with one but a twin pregnancy at best.

Happy days, as the good news travels fast. All the community was rejoicing for the family as a stepping stone that Freddy had in mind and, with the added responsibility, he could change or at least show some initiative.

Mum would eat only fruits as her appetite was gone, and Freddy started being more caring to her needs… and Yes!

Let's go back to the beginning of the book. Two healthy boys came into this world on that September day in the Balmain District Hospital. On the year that would see the winning of Balmain Tigers[67], two little cubs opened their eyes for the first time. The coveted rugby league champion was the only championship they won, and our birth would foresee the final closure of the maternity ward in Balmain hospital.

[67] Balmain Tigers: A rugby club.

Neighbourhood of Twins

Our little neighbourhood bears the name of "Meraya".[68]

The family house is situated just in the vicinity of the mosque that captain Gjyli built just for himself 1783, in order to fulfil his obligatory 5 times prayers of the day.

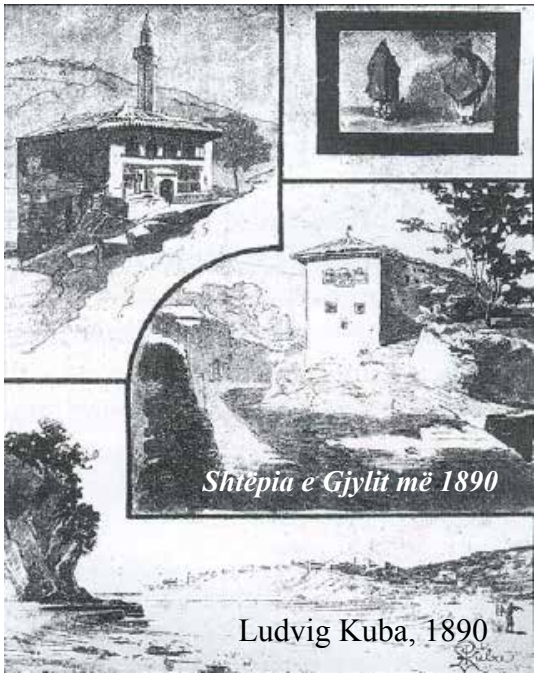
The Venetian style of architecture, entwined with Ottoman flair, was a norm of the day for most of the houses in Ulchin[69], including ours. Our grandfather, Jamal, purchased from Muyali family, was of similar manner.

Everybody knew each other, as generations past would never sell the houses, only in exceptional circumstances. For us, that was an open canvas of different characters, with its own flair and story.

At the top were the Resulbegu brothers and five of the houses that symbolised the bygone era of wealth, but to us, the older brother Zifo would strike as the peculiar one.

Although in older age, he would scream at the top of his lungs at eleven past midnight, "Good night, Mother!"

[68] Meraya: A relic of the Ottoman past.
[69] Ulchin: Alternative spelling of "Ulqin".



In the morning, the same ritual, "Good morning, Mother!"

They both passed away a long time ago, but I swear I could occasionally still hear his strong baritone of farewells.

The neighbourhood of twins was unparalleled in any way. Due to the many wells, the magic water flowed freely. Who knows, but it had four different families all blessed with twin set of boys in our street.

Next to us, the Kaçaniq twins, a few doors down, the Çaushi twins, Kurti, Zyberi, and so on…And us two little pugs, stretching their first cry in the land down under.

[70]Sunny place in Turkish language

[70] Sunny place in Turkish language.

The House on Top of the Hill

It will entail a long stretch of names to mention all the clans in our street, so without becoming a villain and forgetting anyone, we will politely decline this noble endeavour. It will be a shame if we did not mention this house on the top of the hill overlooking all the others, as it resembled the house in the psychological horror movie "Psycho", the masterpiece Hitchcock directed in 1960.

The house belonged to the Catholic diocese as a place for the priests as their primary residence. To us, those men in the dark robes looked more like Norman Bates* the character than a man of the cloth.

The priest would change with the times and tribulation. It was so odd that these poor souls never married as the church doctrine of celibacy still rules. Dom Thomas was a person of immense knowledge. He would always tell us that if we write about the deity in the Albanian language, capital letters must be used.

"You can't not mention God's name in vain; it must be written with capital letters. Our forefathers, the ancient Illyrians, did worship the stars that transcends time and place, Amen."

Our street starts from the top of the mosque. Today, it's been re-named to "Mehmet Gjyli" ex "Djuro Djakonovic", another relic from the era. This place was ruled by a Yugoslav communist, hence, bearing the name of a young revolutionary.

A few hundred meters below, the streetscape changes and start resembling the unmanned shacks looking more like "Favelas" in Rio. The "Totoshi" neighbourhood of coloured ones belonged to the outcast of many societies in the Balkan and throughout Europe, the indestructible Gypsies.

They arrived with the onslaught of the Ottomans in the 15th century behind the caravans as blacksmith and artisans from the Punjab, an area on the Indian subcontinent. India's caste system is among the world's oldest forms of surviving social stratification and is still very prevalent among the Gypsies in my neighbourhood.

To outline the grand divide between the ones that become part of the society in our case, and the other travellers without a fixed address, a word "gabel", which is a slur to this day, is used to describe them. A thorn in the eye of integrated local Gypsies, the others turn to crime, managing this business of beggars that in organisation skills would match any well-known business.

In our street, these unsung heroes of our society, just because of their darker skin, were always downcast and looked at as lesser people. It should be noted that even the graveyard is divided, so even in death, they are discriminated against. Let's just state that this wonderful free-spirited race would always protect the twin boys going on our way to school.

Even our professor of music, Hajdar, this noble man, a friend of our father, was so well-liked among us. He was never looked down as different; he was just part of Ulqin as much as the person that felt more native than him.

Two-Gun Salute

The imminent news of our birth was celebrated with the two-gun salute as it was a customary relic of the past tradition that is venerated among Albanians. If a girl was born by any chance, there would have been a stone silence. Go figure that out.

In the household of Jamal, the traditional welcome signalled to the rest of the street that finally, there was new offspring into the family. Some long-awaited good news; Freddy had become a father to two healthy boys. Grandsons to cherish. Little did Jamal know that his dear son was up to his old tricks.

Mum had to restart her work as soon we became a little stronger, at Balmain hospital, serving food to the patients. Freddy's boredom at being a provider did not sit well with him. The few menial jobs that he did hold eventually got him sacked due to his negligence, by not even showing up for work. The uncertainty had returned. Being married to a compulsive liar and pathological gambler was a hard pill to swallow.

Melbourne, which seemed the precursor of all bad things; a pretext to move in Sydney, as if by some miracle, things would change, had only cemented the old ways and nights on end, not knowing whether he was alive or dead. Addiction is a curse that's gone out of control, and when you drown your sorrows in alcohol, it spells trouble. Some days, he would come back from the dungeon of gambling lair, and the smell

of whiskey, smoke and cheap perfume would engulf the room in which we were all crammed.

Mum's repeated pleading for him to stop this self-destruction came to no avail…he did not listen, his inner demons, would eat him alive. When we were toddlers, we were once so unwell that we were both induced in this cold chamber at the children's hospital; the only way to reduce our spiralling temperature, and Mum was the only person allowed in.

Shimmering with us, together not knowing whether it was from cold or the body reacting to the shock just witnessed. This episode would not end there, as he was not ready to take a mantle of father and be a provider. Mum would work, and he would sleep all day long, recuperating from all night's binging and gambling.

We started getting stronger, even playing in the front yard outside with the tap and garden hose. Suddenly, the screeching of brakes of an incoming car, the smell of fumes in the air, with this fog. We were millimetres from death, saved by God's Providence. I guess it was not our time yet; our guardian angels were on our side and our father on the other.

The sprinkler of the hose in its full glory made it look like a dancing cobra, with no master. That fateful day, something snapped in my father's mind. As the fog was clearing up, he was holding us both in a state of disbelief; he'd almost lost us in the moment.

He made his mind up. Najee had to return back home, and that was it. That same rush of adrenalin that made him leave Ulqin, then Melbourne, was urging him now to send his family away again. This was no place to raise a family. His mind made up, his intention as clear as day. A person with no money is like a drowning man trying to clutch at straw.

Borrowing was the only option left as all other money was gone, with the promise of reuniting with the family after he found some work up north.

"Six months, that's all I need to get back to you…"

He whispered the same words of false promise to her while his young family was boarding the plane.

"Six more months, and then no one will pull us apart. This too shall pass."

Start counting.

Twenty years, twenty-seconds; it seems easy, disembodied spirit becoming a single parent, mother of twins, not knowing what the future is holding behind the iron curtain again.

The Invisible Forces of Darkness

1972.

The clouds of "Terra Australis"54 started looking like a pipe dream! Mum was leaving behind the life that had so much promise for a better future to the point of no return. Returns are not easy. Ulqin, the city that fairytales are made of, the city of myths and legends, constantly living in its glorious past to no use at all. To some, this city on the shores of the Adriatic Sea is nothing but just that! To some, the umbilical cord of the world — l'ombelico del mondo. This is where we are coming back.

Belgrade Airport, all the extended family had made the arduous trip from the south of Montenegro to the Yugoslav Capital. The excitement in the air would be occasionally interrupted by the announcement of the plane arrivals.

Both families in welcome mood. Our mum's family, ecstatic to finally see the daughter and grandchildren, and our proud grandpa Jamal, welcoming the daughter-in-law, and the blessing that she was given by having twin boys.

The security in those days was almost non-existent, and Jamal was so eager to see the grandsons that he was longing for. The daughter-in-law that was getting ready to just leave the plane and his son…

"Where is my son?"

As soon as their eyes locked on each other, mum's downcast eyes did not give much away; not the sadness, not the pain, not the nights full of terrors of uncertainty.

"No, he would not do this to me; this is a trickery of some sort, and it's not funny."

Mum was silent again.

"He would not dare to send you alone; this is impossible." Jamal started whispering to himself.

Deafening silence. Jamal was in a state of disbelief, his daughter-in-law all alone. He felt a strange cold sweat pouring from his forehead. In his deeper, inner sanctum, he knew, but still, it was a very heavy pill to swallow. A son who is 22,000 km away.

You cannot fight the invisible forces of darkness, let alone his son's inner demons that will prevail for years to come.

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

Flamur's ability to charm his way out of this was a gift he had with the bag full of promises that led to no man's land. Being in denial is not the same as admitting that his prolonged absence would cause havoc in the little place of petty bourgeois minded people.

The town started going into overdrive, the gossip mill at full speed. What she will do with no husband, around her? Is she staying, is she going? The town sounded like a beehive of idle talk, backbiting trash talk, full of insinuations. How people can gloat in somebody else's misfortune is still news to me. But that was the norm of the day. Small minded people feel empowered to put someone else down in order to get out of their misery in today's jargon trolls.

The only person that was not even asked how she felt was our mum. She was way too busy taking care of us than people making stories and

talking trash. In Ulqin, everybody's business is somehow for all to mingle. God forbid to take care of your own backyard first; these sticky bees were devoid of any reason. The old "Nonnas" of the town would sip the Turkish coffee all day long. Turning the cups upside down interpreting the coffee grounds as well as those on the saucer. Fortune telling of the highest order was the cheapest form of entertainment. To some degree, escapism from the daily struggles in a time when soap-operas were a distant future, not even on the horizon.

No wonder the small towns hardly move or change. It seems that some invisible hand hypnotised the brain, always in neutral mode. Survival instincts had to kick in in those times of hardship. Being all alone was not an easy feat, let alone for the women. At that time, you were scrutinised for even a minute thing, let alone being penniless and coming from the land of plenty, down under.

There is Nothing like Grandchildren

1974.

Having the grandchildren that he was longing for for so long, our grandfather Jamal, this exquisite Don Quixote, lookalike would walk hand in hand with us. It was such a proud moment that he would parade us through the city's main street telling everybody.

"They are my son, Flamur's, kids, my grandsons."

He would relish the time with us and on rare occasions, he would show his playful side. We would jump on his back and pretty much destroy the poor man, but he would not budge or get angry at all but state,

"I did not have any goodness from my son, at least these two rascals are making me forget the pain."

Times were critical. His son had left him in very awkward position, having to take care of his daughter-in-law, and the grandsons that he loved. Living behind the "Iron Curtain" is not an easy feat, and the future was grim. In those days, to exist meant surviving, as material means were depleted. Even in those challenging times, our grandfather's stoicism and determination to bring the son home was something he was contemplating.

In order to survive, Jamal would turn to the illegal tobacco business. He would travel for days on end to source his tobacco in the Herze-

govina[71] region, far away from home. That was his preferred grounds as people were trustworthy and ready to sell him the extra crop they were hiding from the communist regime. Australia was a double edged sword for him as at that time; the Yugoslav regime was fighting open warfare against the small group of fanatical Croatian nationalists, trained and equipped by extreme emigrant organisations from Australia that infiltrated the territory with the intent to organise an uprising against Tito's regime known by the name of "Ustasha".

The manhunt would follow, and these poor souls did not fare well as the local population was scared and would not show any signs of upraising. The capture was swift but it also spelled doom for Jamal, as his truck full of the best quality tobacco was stopped as a sight of precaution by the soldiers.

"Hey! Old man, what is in the back of your truck?"

"Oh! Just some merchandise, nothing much really."

As he was trying to bluff his way out of this mess, the driver told him that these were not any guys that could be bribed.

"Open up! We have some "Ustaša"[72] terrorists on the run."

With a heavy heart, the truck revealed the golden tobacco that spelled the end of an era for our beloved Jamal. He could not manoeuvre his way out of this mess. This was a tremendous hit for his already diminishing finances. The confiscation of his tobacco, accompanied by a heavy fine meant that this venture was all but over, doomed from the start. Everything he worked on was gone; his heart was shattered; he was a broken man. Returning to Ulqin, his health took a turn for the worst.

He was having heart palpitations, and his breath was becoming heavy. He was starting to surrender. This tall and proud man resembled a nervous wreck; a shadow of himself. There was a feeling of unease. Jamal

[71] Herzegovina is the southern region of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It literally means, "Duke's land".

[72] Ustaša: Croatian Second World War Military.

was living on borrowed time. An ambulance siren was getting near our home which only meant one thing. The city had no hospital within 30 km radius, and he had to be rushed there ASAP. That day, Uncle Muho witnessed the passing away of his dear friend and confidante. He wanted him in that ambulance as he had a confession to make.

He died before he had a chance to be revived. The doctors could not do much, but just stated the time of death. He had a stroke and that finished him.

What did he say to Uncle Muho! We were to learn that many years later. As he was clutching his belt, in there was a hidden plane ticket to Australia; he just uttered, "Flamuuur".

If his plan succeeded, this history would have been different. Being born, and subsequently dying are two opposites that are certain. Everybody who knew him came to his funeral; this man was special, a giant among men. He was the backbone that kept like our family together like glue. This unpredicted loss was more than we could bear.

The grandmother Zoorayah's wings had been clipped. What can a young widow do apart from sobbing in silence? As our grandfather's body laid in the middle of the room surrounded by the wailing women in white, we were both ushered in to kiss his motionless body. In our reality, he did not look like our grandfather but more like a huge lump of cottage cheese. We were so young, as our brain had played tricks on us with the sight that we should never have witnessed. Our only protector was now gone, Uncle Kadri was in exile, awaiting the immigration papers to move in America, and the other man of the house was young Uncle Murtagh, too young to take over the house duties.

This huge vacancy could not be filled, so Uncle Kadri had to leave his dreams of going to America and assume the role his father never got him ready to do.

With this immense loss, Mum had no choice but to start looking at how to support her family, as she was not cut from the cloth to ask for handouts.

The Enemy Within

"I will not be begging for money, as my sons do have a father", Mum would encourage herself. Orphans, with a father alive! Grandfather gone, without him lost.

What is happening? Why all this commotion and conundrum!? Mum was now on the firing line and lo and behold, the enemy was within.

The return of Uncle Kadri from his dream of reaching the better life was abruptly put on hold, and Mum was in his eyes a burden. "There is no need for your input." Mum was quite adamant that she would take care of us as a single parent with hubby far away. So many nights talking to herself all alone; her tears would roll down her face as the seeds of Pomegranate, her high cheek bones showing a woman of mountain beauty that was not ready to give up.

Little did Mum know that this sacrifice would mean giving up on her youth. The non-existent needs of her children were put first and preoccupied her life now.

Patience is a virtue and putting trust in God almighty would require the strength that she did not know she even possessed. The trials of life with the perils of constant gossip and innuendo was all the daily routine Najee had to face head on. Our beloved grandmother's mum's "Nana" would often remind her; "With tears, you can't move forward."

People's minds were so set that Mum was taken care of, especially having a husband that sends money from abroad; to the ill-informed folk, this was a truth set in stone.

As time would go by, Mum was relying more on us as a reminder to work hard and ask questions later. She was not about to give up as her first employment coincided with the opening of new hotels in long beach, the communist regime decided to build the hotel complex that would for a long time and be a main financial provider for many families in Ulchin. One wage was not enough as the bills were mounting. She started a part-time job as a coffee maker in the local cafe that would serve so many coffees made in a copper pot, and all with the crema thick yellow cream on top! As customers were a picky bunch of people, she would have to endure some shouting as well, but it came with the territory. There was almost nothing stopping her; she aged in a few years, more than 10 years of her stay down under, the long hours took their toll.

Still, with that all that doom and gloom, she would come with us in bed and start singing the lullaby of a far gone land that she left remembering the Cypriot women, with whom they shared the house in South Melbourne, echoing the song in Greek,

"Kalimera e Kalispera, kala se si, kala salata, tikanis pijata."

In mere joy of her singing, we would see her sad eyes set upon us, yet trying to conceal her feeling of being alone.

"Where is Our Dad, Mum?"

Working in the "Grand Hotel Lido" as a salad maker introduced her to a lady that was larger than life. Her first neighbour that she never met before, at first glance could be mistaken for a good Scottish maid. Red haired Hasene would become her staunch supporter and would never leave her out of sight.

Mum started socialising, making friends, drinking Turkish coffee, reading the little cups, making sense of the little pictures the empty cup would leave, foretelling the future as time would go by. Grandmother Zoorayah would often join her daughter-in- law, and when the friends were gone and dusted, she would ask,

"Is it true that you are going back?"

Mum's white lies to those so-called friend were that her departure was imminent but some formalities were prolonging the due process of her return to Australia.

More often than not, we would pester mum with the obvious question, "Where is our dad, mum? Why is he not returning?"

She did know how to make us feel good, and we would be fast asleep as her soothing voice would fib her way out of it. Kids let's do the Lord's prayer, before you sleep and ask God for forgiveness and the swift return of your father.

She was quite ingenious with her many excuses as to why this larger than life figure that was by now our saintly dad would not return to us.

From being so rich that it was impossible for him to detach himself from all the responsibility, to the most sinister one, that of him being involved with the antigovernment Albanian nationalist movement. From so many little trinkets from down under, one magic blue glass bottle would be a standout to our childhood!

We are talking about Vicks, a topical ointment that was an absolute saver. In many years, our little chest was congested, and this bottle did the trick.

Some free advertising but when we were having a stuffy nose or a cough, this magic, dark blue glass jar, as we recalled was a life saver, as it meant linking Australia with all that is good.

And there would not be a fair deal to not mention our trusted cassette and radio recorder, good old "Philips" that Flamur used to record himself and talk to all the members of the family. Each time our dear grandmother would long to hear his voice, the trusted Philips tape recorder would do the trick, "My dearest mother…"

So many times, we would notice the planes circling out in the sky, with us in expectation for our dad to come back. But he would not come now, not ever as if he was angry with us. The planes in the sky would from time to time sprout thousands of paper notices out of their windows, glorifying the system, and would make their lazy dropout into our street as well. Mum would innocently pick this odd-looking pamphlet running towards the door with a big smile in her face.

"Kids, your dad wrote you a letter that you've waited for so long."

We were in pure bliss; ecstatic, full of joy, a moment to burst into laughter, and we also believed this white lie that mum was serving us with a gusto. Today, as we recount this story, we start laughing again. How on earth, out of thousands of these pamphlets, would Mum pick the one that was addressed to us was beyond our comprehension?

We were still to young make sense of the letters, but big enough in believing that we do have a dad albeit far away, that is thinking of us and the letter was full proof that he hadn't forgotten us. The postman

in our little street would hand deliver all the letters as the notion of the post box did not exist.

His name we still remember was Ave Pashuk.

"Pashuuku, Pashuku is coming as he would with is gravel voice, greet us with a big smile from his motorbike "Tomos"[73], and pull a letter for the family out of his leather bag. We learned very late that his name actually did not mean postman, but was his first name.

Being a twin meant that you were never really alone, and this constant sibling rivalry was healthy, as long as you knew how to keep your boundaries.

But if football was in question, playing in front of the concrete porch of our house meant that we would play to the point of exhaustion. As we would finish the game, on one of those fateful days, my twin, Sami overslept next to an open window and the draft did the rest. Sami's predicament did not look good. He got so sick that his lungs were infected.

The doctors realised it was pneumonia, and suggested the hospital as a preventive treatment. Mum would not budge as she was working, and she could not afford me being in hospital, so she decided to keep him home. For me, strange as it sounds, Sami being sick was a feast day of different food that Mum served him daily, which he was too weak to eat. I would make sure that no meal went unpunished, so in that regard, I started fattening up. On a rare occasion of oversight from Mum's side as I would even eat the little scraps of leftovers, Mum noticed and felt truly ashamed that she did not buy us two "burek"[74]. As she burst into tears, I joined her as a precursor to maybe getting another one.

In many dreams, we would retell Mum the exact location and what our father did in Sydney. She was flabbergasted with the description of the events we would recount. Being only two years old and remembering is not bad, even Mum was so happy with that, but on Christmas Eve in 1975, we were truly scared to death of having to encounter this monster for the first time…yes!

[73] Tomos: Yugoslav top selling brand.
[74] Burek: A pastry filled with cheese or mincemeat.

We are talking about Santa Claus that communist regime morphed into the Father-Winter for bringer of gifts and a new year; no one dared to talk about Christmas then.

Being five years old, we still did not fully grasp that Father winter was such a terrifying creature. We subsequently learned that behind the beard was our cousin Rex, earning a few extra bucks for his studies.

As we had outgrown our little suits that were a perfect fit as a three-year-old, we looked pretty miserable in those tight fitting clothes. Mum creed that we should never feel underwhelmed in any aspect of life, and she would provide any necessary means so that we would not be left out as outcasts without a father to provide.

It was always a very precarious time when the local Gypsy-fortune tellers would come to our doorstep. Knowing Mum's predicament regarding her long lost husband, they would foretell of the imminent arrival of our father. Mum was more than happy to hear this, and in the end, rewarded these leeches feeding on mum's misfortune.

Old Man Lano Kasmi would often take us to a nearby train station, on the lookout for arriving trains. He would lift his finger and pinpoint the train that would bring our father. Like excited puppies, we would squeal "baba, baba" while trains would come and go, many faces passing us by and Sami's reasoning;

"It's so good that our father is not coming as we don't have any room for all these people."

Little did he know…

The School Bag

1975-1976.

The first day at school brings back a bag full of emotions and trepidation that as young pupils, you can't comprehend. The chaos, the noise, the crying of the children and parents alike; the feeling of being lost till the unmistaken sound of the first bell ringing throughout the school corridors.

In Europe, at that particular year, the starting age to begin Year one was the ripe age of seven. We were quite the opposite; mature in stature but age wise, we did not fulfil the quota as we were only five years old. Mum being a stubborn mule was adamant that our age was quite appropriate and would not take no for answer. In order for her plan to succeed, she engaged Uncle Mali to lobby on our behalf as his friend was in the registry. Even that formality was passed with flying colours.

The first hour in the class, only two kids put their hand up for a special request…

It was us! We wanted so badly to go home; we did not realise that you are meant to attend class to the end, but God forbid! Our urge was to leave and to our surprise, our teacher gave us the leave, scratching his head as this was very unusual.

Those first days of our education, apart from our looks which set us apart from the rest, there was one particular element that did make us

the laughing stock of the entire class - our Australian school bag. When she left good old Sydney, Mum, with her ingenious thinking, took two identical school bags, rectangle in shape, more like an English jewellery box than a school bag. In Australia, it would have been a common thing, but in our class, it drew laughter as it would not even fit in the school table, causing further embarrassment. Mum relented in the end and did buy us two white leather bags that we saw as a canvas to completely destroy with our graffiti all over the surface showing our originality. Little did we know that Mum was not very happy about this so-called work of art, and this continuing saga with bags ended up in us getting a decent hiding.

In our schoolroom, we started making our first acquaintances with friends: the Sadiku twins, first in line Afrim and his sister Qendresa, Suad, Samir, Teuta, Fiqi, Cufo, etc.

Teacher Abraham would play his little mandolin, not "Captain Correlli's" as in the movie of the same name, but enough to keep our attention span long enough so we didn't drift away.

He had a peculiar practice to make his point known as Cufo would feel the wrath, pulling him up from his sideburns and then slowly hand slap him as he dropped down to take a seat. All the classroom would fall silent. His victims, the usual suspects, the ones that misbehaved, his stick firm in hand, his retribution stern and with no emotion. He did overlook us as the dimwits of the classroom. We did not even understand why we were in the room at all. That did change with the coming of our new teacher Pauline.

She did have a different touch, so for a change, we started learning as well as realising that school was not only to pass some time; we began to feel the basis of knowledge. She would praise as a customary introduction our great leader "TITO".[75]

Not understanding politics, I would turn to my classmate Samir, "Hey, if the old man dies, this other apparatchik Stane, would become the new leader!"

"Teacher, teacher, Sami wants our Comrade Tito dead."

The teacher Pauline felt uncomfortable as she knew that our family did not fare well with the regime. She just rebuffed me with the comment that our dear Comrade Tito will live as long as our highest mountains. That day, I learned to keep my mouth shut and never trust Samir.

Then the professor of German, John was a league of his own. He was never meant to be a teacher but a priest, so disciplined and stern that he would resemble a teddy bear with his thick eyebrows. We are still thankful that he put the foundation of German into our thick skulls. As the memories of the past flood by, I can still recall the moment he would ask me in order to give me a passing grade…

[75] Tito: A Comrade, and a Communist leader of Yugoslavia.

"Sami, do you use the plural DER or DAS?"

"Antworten auf die fragen"? Answer the question?"

I was totally dumbfounded, and, in my head, I just whispered daaaa…

—Daaaaa…

Yes! The ecstatic professor John, would jump with joy. "You see, the student was confused, but he did correct himself here and the pass is well done."

Such were his teaching methods that even today, he resonates with us.

Auf wiedersehen, Professor John Markagjoni …

Circumcision

The time has come… As Jews celebrate Bar Mitzvah, the coming of age ritual for boys, Albanian Muslims adhere to the same ritual. Our mum's mind was set that the time had come for her pride and joy to fulfil this deed of circumcision as early possible according to the age-long tradition. Grandmother Zoorayah was not pleased with this idea as her son was far away, and this ritual steeped in tradition can't take place without him being present. Najee was adamant that she should proceed without the husband and that if his past deeds taught her anything, Flamur, would not come for another twenty years. That was not as far-fetched, so the grandmother relented to the plan Mum was undertaking.

Circumcision is the worlds' oldest planned surgical procedure, suggested by anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith to be over 15,000 years old, predating recorded history. The narrative in Genesis chapter 17 describes the circumcision of Abraham and the slaves.

Abraham's descendants are commanded to circumcise their sons on the eighth day of life as part of a covenant with God. All this history was unknown to us; we just felt uneasy as every member of the family was starting to look at us in a different way. If you tell a 7-year-old kid that you are about to part with part of your body and have your foreskin removed, it would not make any sense. The celebration was about to start, the drums were signalling the coming of uncle, who, according to the ancient custom of Albanian Mountains, brings a full-grown ram for slaughter.

Is it possible that the city that bears the old name of ancient

Colchinium would still remember the legend of Jason and his crew of Argonauts? As Jason returned with his golden fleece, he took a winged ram in Colchis on that fateful day. Our ram did not have wings, but was on the shoulders of a gypsy that kept dancing like a whirling dervish, with the beats of drums getting stronger and closer. This ram would be sacrificed in our honour. Little we did know that would be last that we saw of him.

This ritual in Ulqin was about to be performed by the local barber who dubbed as a circumcision master. I guess cutting hair and shaving people is the same thing, right.

Barber Rex was well-honed in this practice, and as he was sharpening his blade, the procedure was about to begin. All of a sudden, the doors and every possible wooden furniture in the house was being hit in order to make noise, the noise that will rival what we still had no idea was about to be administered.

Two uncles Fadil, and old Muho, were holding us, one from each side.

I was told to not move…Barber, with his blade was waiting for his lamb, and I about to be butchered. His hand looked ominous, my pyjamas were down.

"In the name of God, come, my dear boy!"

"What is happening?"

"Just a little cut, and it's all done!"

I don't remember the foreskin being pulled but suddenly, the squirting of the blood hit the eye of Barber Rex, who, instead of disinfecting the skin, stopped the gushing blood with a pile of cotton.

My twin was next …

"Does it hurt, Sami?"[76]

[76] Naim's eyes were full of terror.

I was told to keep my pain to myself and tell him nothing …

"No?!"

And yes! The excruciating pain, the feeling of cold blade cutting my soft skin - I had to tell a white lie. But I was not to be outdone by my twin, so instead of screaming the name of my mother, I did burst my lungs away, "Father, father!"

The longing for a long-lost brother was too much for my aunties to hear, and they both collapsed, losing consciousness in this macabre ritual that would stay with us for the rest of our lives.

The suffering did not end there as our faces by now were being defaced with charcoal to ward of the evil spirits. We were promised a new bike in gratitude for being so strong. Barber Rex, or in our case, the butcher Rex, did not tell my mum to remove our blood-stained cotton, from our bruised manhood. After a week, it dried out to create even more of a drama that would be witnessed by the mother of our childhood friend, Sali…

Mum tried to strip away the cotton that was entangled with the skin that was raw, a sight no mother needs to see, but that was the punishment, scarred for life with the handiwork of barber Rex; it scarred us ever since.

Enter the Dragon

Once upon a time…

No, we are not borrowing from Sergio Leones the classic movie of the same name, but to tell you a story of a city that had two cinemas that today have none and stand in the ruins of a bygone era.

Let's roll back. Action!

As you would enter the cinema, the pretty face of "Tippi" Hedren and Charlton Heston would stare at you as welcoming sight. Many years later, I would have the privilege to shake the very hand of "Moses", but that's another tale to this story. How this long-lasting infatuation started, we have to thank our dear cousin, Rizzo.

As a student, he would take us with him to watch the movie of the day and this became a ritual he would always adhere to. Not being rich meant that one of us would miss a movie and Sami knew how to enlist himself to the task of being the right person for watching a movie. Somehow, I would always sneak in so poor Rizzo had to cough up two tickets instead of one as Jon Voight's "The Champ" would beam on the silver screen. Ricky Schroder's tears would roll as his on-screen dad is dying; we would empathise with the pain of losing the dad and cry as well. As poor Rizzo was lamenting the next day, of not having any money for lunch, we regretted our ignorance to this day.

Rizzo was not only a cousin but some kind of surrogate mother as well. Travelling from the countryside was not an easy task for him as a student but to us, he was a life saver as he would make us breakfast; eggs

sunny side up were his specialty. He had a soft spot for his only aunty as Mum would toil day and night. She had become a person who just would tuck us into bed. On the other hand, Rizzo could not understand how she made us so lazy that even making our bed was a difficult task.

As a workaholic, Mum was so tired by the end of the day that we rarely witnessed her showing love and tenderness towards us. We did get a good hiding though, with the same roller that she would roll the pizza dough, and she would not show any mercy.

We did have a mini growth spurt in school, so we did look more mature for our age. Our only escapism was indulging in movies, trying to emulate the screen heroes of film celluloid. We would stare for hours on end at the movie posters and then get taken to a "twilight zone" that eventually became real to us.

The Golden era of Hollywood real studio stars, from Orson Wells, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn as "Robin Hood", John Wayne in Ford classics, Jimmy Stuart in "It's a Wonderful Life", Frank Capra's masterpiece,

Cary Grant in "North by Northwest". Alfred Hitchcock's genius that would make us scream in Psycho and laugh with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis adventures.

The real magic of movies took us to a world that was so different to the reality that surrounded us. It started as we would walk down to go to our favourite cinema at the small beach; the "Garden Cinema". During the summer, an open-air cinema, with the largest screen in Yugoslavia was a Mecca of movie goers. As kids, we would not wait in line to get the tickets; we would just sneak in front of others as little rascals.

"Enter the Dragon" was showing.

Bruce Lee, in full glory; his last movie was our first Bruce Lee experience. His fighting skills transfixed us into love at first sight that has never changed to this day.

His movement with "nunchaku" martial arts weapons consisted of two sticks connected at one end by a short chain or rope was legendary, and we did try to emulate our new hero's moves, but apart from lots of broken heads, we never mastered Bruce's on-screen persona.

"It's like a finger pointing away to the moon.

Don't concentrate on the finger or you miss,

All the heavenly glory."

Bruce's words resonated with us to the point that it gave us an extra step on the walk home with our new idol; it was such a breeze. We did pick few fights with the local gypsies as the norm of the day, and the pain felt real so that it cooled our feet from becoming Bruce.

Heroes kept coming; from Rocky Balboa, to Star Wars, and then to Indiana Jones, but they never stood a chance against our Bruce in the end. The other cinema in the city was the "Kino-Salla"[77], where, as school pupils, we were forced to watch the communist propaganda, glorifying

[77] Kino-Salla: A cinema hall.

the partisans of Comrade Tito. They never came with warnings as most of them were so graphic in depiction of the suffering gore and blood which set in our memory.

As the pictures were the favourite pastime of most local movie goers, we would indulge from Bollywood, singing and dancing to the Swedish, soft porn movies that were so popular that we had designated rows. First two being the wankers, the rest would be filled with all walks of life. As the second floor was more of the serious crowd, they would spit on us for fun; it made for lots of juicy exchanges that would end up in the whistling of local gypsies that would fill the air with a fart just for the sake of it.

First TV Set in the Neighbourhood

Being behind the iron curtain had its perks as the majority of the neighbourhood was poor. That all changed in the early 70s as the first migrant workers who earned some money overseas in a country like Germany started bringing their hard-earned money in the country of their origin.

As "Gastarbeiter"30, after the Second World War sustained the German economic miracle. Uncle Mali was one of the few ones that decided to leave the factory floors of Germany and return home. Apart from many gifts that he would shower his immediate family, this little glass box in the middle of the room got our attention. What it could be? Curiosity did kill the cat. It looked strange till Gianni turned it on and "Voilá", the miracle of television in the living room. We were completely besotted, with open mouths drooling like little pugs waiting for dinner. This was the first television set in our neighbourhood, and it required many neighbours to come with gifts that are taken as a token of goodwill, and you have to do the same and reciprocate the gift that kept coming.

As Yugoslav TV had only a limited programming, 7:15 pm was reserved for animated film that would start with Tom and Jerry from Hanna-Barbera, MGM production team. Our houses were joined together but not close enough to have direct access to this miracle box. We were hypnotised by the black and white images that would make us forget the hard floor we were sitting on, as nothing could dampen our enthusiasm for Tom and Jerry, Bugs Bunny and the mouse factory that got good old Walt Disney into our hearts.

This idyll that Uncle Mali started was also finished by him as we would disturb his idea of peace. As we kept quiet in our designated corner, we noticed that the welcoming mat that initially got us into the house had become a mere nuisance for him. Yugoslavia, as the only country behind the iron curtain that adopted liking the USA, had direct free access to all the free propaganda and the library from movies to the serials. They kept coming and painting a different picture in our young heads of life in the western capitalistic society that did not match what socialist books were telling us.[78]

The roses smell differently coming from the mouths of Disney heroes which would create an illusion that had no faults per se. Despite the hardship Mum faced on a daily basis, she had a little luck in getting us our own TV that she procured from her friend Julka, who'd brought a TV for her brother in Albania as a gift. At the time, it was completely closed society and as such, no TV gift was allowed.

Our lady luck smiled on us as we finally did not need to go next door; we had our own pride and joy "EI-NISH", a local TV brand that worked like clockwork. Remember the smell of the interior in a new car? That's how we remember the first TV. Twelve buttons in unison, the pure joy that would make us couch potatoes of the highest order, that gave Mum so much needed peace after her hard day at work.

[78] I guess Marx and Engels did not watch "Dynasty".

The Postman Always Rings Twice

While mum was always stern in her punishment, this was the opposite for our uncles who spoiled us. As city brats, we found long awaited freedom each time we would undertake a trip to the country side. Having to tend to farm animals, feed the chickens, and look after the hunting dogs, our grandfather, Malik's pride and joy was a useful way to spend our school holidays. We had the better of both worlds that most of our city friends never experienced. Being let loose from the constraints of Najee's discipline was a welcoming sight for us, but a nightmare for our dear Auntie Havo, who suffered from migraine headaches that at times were aggravated by our arrival.

Uncle Fadil, from a blacksmith of the village, by sheer luck of being at the right time and place, became the postman of the whole region of "Ana e Malit".13

His dashing good looks and the postman uniform made him quite popular, especially among many widowed housewives. He was a harbinger of good news and that special service always preceded with a double knock.

As the village of "Katërkoll" was near the border with Albania, as a consequence, there was unlimited access to the propaganda of the "Stalinist" Albania. Fadil believed the ominous dictator, Enver Hoxha's[79] totalitarian system and all the achievements the regime would blurt from TV, especially those that compered Albania, with Ethiopia and Papua New Guinea. The news bulletin would end with the weather report that was always delivered to a tee by this elderly gentleman in his monotone voice;

"City of Stalin 12 - C."

His voice, soothing to the point that bedtime was not far, but on one of his many outings, instead of fare-welling his viewers with an Albanian word, he had a Freudian slip and instead, used the Italian "Buona Notte!" Poor Mr. Weatherman, Petrit Leka, from that night on, we never saw him again.

This infatuation with communist propaganda from both sides made him a disciple of Tito and Enver; both sworn enemies at the time, but in Uncle's eyes, a perfect example of a strong leader that cares for its people.

Sunday was reserved only for us kids. That's the only time Uncle Fadil would relinquish the TV and let us enjoy the movies that the only Albanian TV channel would transmit. As watching Albanian TV was a crime in Tito's Yugoslavia, this was something that we did not talk about on our return to the city.

Riza, Kadri, Adem, Agim; all these kids were there for us! This oasis of peace and fun playing games from dusk till dawn. Only 20-km away from Ulqin, this became our home away from home. Our adventurous souls kept us never sitting still, and we would make life hell for our auntie who was losing her marbles over our misdemeanours.

Accompanying our grandfather Malik, hunting wild animal, we would cherish and feel alive. At night, he would smoke cure some meat

[79] Enver Hoxha: Another name for Enver Hodza. Ominous dictator/leader of a totalitarian system from 1944 to 1985. See 55.

in his hut to be cured for the winter months and tell tales of stories of old.

"When the snow falls, and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives…"

He encouraged the two of us to be together, not bickering like old ladies as we used to do so often in front of him that would drive him crazy.

Grandfather's donkey was a fine animal; stubborn at times, that we were so adamant to ride. Ride we did, but the fall was not as spectacular but more of an embarrassment for one of us. We will let you guess, dear reader, who was that lucky lad. Cousin Kadri started laughing; a laughter that was not to my liking, so in my mind, it sprung that if he hit his bony ass, he would stop. Lo and behold, my toes just snapped. It was not a laughing matter. The poor donkey had that petrifying look that served me good as my poor uncle had to fetch Zef Brisku, the orthopaedic self-taught healer, to have a closer look at my fine attempt to teach my cousin a lesson.

The Little Shack of Uncle Kadri

If Sean Connery had a long-lost brother on the shores of Adriatic, then our Uncle Kadri would fit the bill perfectly. As the second in charge after his untimely return from his unsuccessful attempt to leave and migrate to the USA, his malevolence towards our mother reached boiling point.

He had to blame someone, and Najee was a perfect scapegoat for his misfortune. It had little to do with our mother, and more to do with his inability to cope with the daily grind that awaited him. He would seek solace in the solitude of his little shack, which at the same time served as a fishing hub. He would cast in the waters of the pristine river Buna that flowed from the mountain top of Albania towards the final destination in the Adriatic Sea. The fishing net was held by this huge wooden beam.

It was known in local slang as "Kalimera"[80] and had nothing to do with the Greek word for good morning; it was an Albanian idiom.

This gentle giant never understood the meaning of having a child as his wife was barren, so he would unleash on Najee with all the insecurities that caused Mum quite an embarrassment.

He would not be much chop as an uncle either, but we learned to deal with his borderline personality disorder, that was diagnosed many years later.

[80] Kalimera: An Albanian idiom which means "to get the fish on the move/go".

He would cause our grandmother, Zoorayah a great deal of displeasure as he was easily persuaded by his wife, who commanded his every move, so much so that his father-in-law figured she was the main instigator to manipulate the poor soul.

"Kiss me in my cheek as I am your Uncle!!!"

His favourite line was him instructing us to obey his request to kiss him, and in some cases, massaging his back as well. There was a certain coldness to this as it was no compulsion in the need to do this half-heartedly. He would whisper in our ears,

"You are my kin, but that mother of yours is nothing to me."

One of his strengths was his skills in the kitchen as a gelato maker; gelato that even the Italian screen goddess, Sophia Loren once admired. In the early 70s, where the river Buna would kiss the shores of the Adriatic Sea, this nudist settlement, which occupied the triangular Paradise Island of "Ada", became the work place where my uncle's "pâtisserie"

pastry chef skills were put to full use. Grandfather Jamal made sure that his son learned this skill that would eventually lead to our family owning our first patisserie shop in Ulqin called "Apple". All the family worked hard, but this would not last long as our aunties had a different idea of fun, and working was not one of them, so they had to close shop after only a year in business.

It is unimaginable that a city which prior to the 1970s was deeply religious and steeped in the tradition of a bygone era would suddenly have a Nudist Resort. Albeit outside the main city where the muezzin voice would call for prayer from many minarets, the regime had the call of a different nature to that of Adam and Eve. Over time, the local population got used to this unusual sight and could serve these naked hordes that came from Western Europe, swallowing their pride, which was not an easy feat. As the river divided the island and the mainland, this little wooden ferryboat on intervals would get the newly - arrived tourist to experience the unspoiled nature of Ada - Boyana.[81]

Uncle Kadri would have some mercy and take us on many occasions to his workstation in the resort. As he would constantly fight with the cheeky waiters who would steal his perfectly made cakes, he would chase them with a blade which made for good entertainment. The smell of fresh gelato and the buzz the sugar hit would create in our developing brain came with a warning …

"Do not look at the naked bodies as all your teeth will fall out!!!"

We never heeded those warnings as the naked bosoms and dangling penises were parading in front of us. It was Fantasia without Disney's score.

[81] Ada - Boyana: A nudist resort.

Grandmother

Our grandmother, Zoorayah was a woman that loved us unconditionally as we were a constant reminder of her flesh and loins that was so far and away. Her bed was next to ours, and she would touch my hand and tell stories of the father we hardly remember, but to her was so alive.

As soon as we would return from school, she made sure that we had some liquids, and that meant her soup. She lived with a broken heart, lamenting the early loss of our grandfather, Jamal and her son being lost in the wilderness of exile. We can still see her face; her beautiful dark eyebrows, her hair always covered in a white scarf that we would always like to tangle to the chair just in spite, but her voice of reason never yelled at us; she would just simply smile with our little mischief.

In the hierarchy of the Albanian household, she liked to keep things in order as her youngest son, Murtagh kept bringing her lots of grievance. He was becoming more like his brother in Australia than she would have liked and that was starting to show.

He loved his drinking, being a lady's man as well, and he would always sing to our grandmother the song of the future wife that would wash her feet which made poor Zoorayah scoff.

In order of the house rules, our Mum should have been her primary caregiver, but with her husband away, that role had to be played by our

Auntie Bude. Poor Bude, to this day in perpetual state of being sick, would refuse any dealing that had to include our grandmother. As she would become a ghost who walks, Zoorayah was the last person in her disturbed mind.

The hospitality of Zoorayah was so legendary that even a person of no means would never be sent away without a proper feed as that was something she really cared about. Teaching us to peel the orange and always sneak a fruit or two in our lap that was meant for her but to no avail, she would always give it to us. On many occasions, she would get her favourite quilt-making lady to stay overnight as a sign of respect with the best food being served. And as luck would have it, she would try to hide the best piece of meat for us two, but this lady with the eagle eye wouldn't have a bar of that and would always get the meat that our granny meant for us.

The Month of Blessings and Giving

Every little suburb in the city that had its own mosque in this particular month, all the street kids would gather and wait for the lights of the minaret to herald the breaking of the fast. In this holy month of Ramadan[82], our duty was to scream at the top of our lungs when it was time to "Break the fast, break the fast!"

We would run like mad dogs, dashing to our own houses, where the real feast in this holy month that everything is different would just unfold before us with a plethora of foods of all kinds. The sight was magnificent; a feast with all manner of delicacies where the fast would be broken with a glass of water and some sweet dates. The dishes would start dancing in front of our faces like whirling dervishes that turn in the heavenly motion, of planets and its own celestial bodies.

All the streets would have this scent of divine presence enhanced with the aroma of the dishes that Ulqin housewives would prepare through the day. The bread from wooden oven bakeries would make fresh loaves on demand, just in time so that people were ready to line up. This sea of people getting this hot bread was very intricate in nature and tasted as fresh as possible. Tempers would flare up with some of the poor folk losing patience, so that the smell of food would be a bit tough to bare.

Before we could fetch the loaf home, half of it would have been

[82] Ramadan: A Muslim fast that lasts 29/30 days.

hungrily devoured by us two standing in front of the chargrilled rotisserie that engulfed our sense of smell and filled up our empty bellies.

The sense of community, doing something for the sake of God, camaraderie, and love of the family eating together, and breaking bread was a very cherished time indeed that would end with a "Bajram".[83] The Muslim trick or treat for us kids meant knocking on every house door and wishing them a good and healthy ending of the month of blessings. As kids, we would expect the coin or two in the end as a good consolation price for all the hard work, while the older folks would go from house to house getting their sugar fix as the best sweets would lure you in. On the spiritual part, as is the tradition among Ulqini was the Muslim's compulsory visit to the graves of their loved ones. This custom that predates the Islam in the Balkans was a tradition kept with fanaticism, not broken to this day.

What is most interesting is the fascination of Albanian Muslims with drinking this clear spirit, "Raki" distilled in copper pots from fermented grapes, as the way to end the fast hypocrisy, to the point that it had no religious importance, only the knowledge that for one month, these moody folk were deprived of the drink.

All the religious festivities in Ulchin[69] were observed, especially St. George's day, on the 6th of May. Our mother dearest would put under our feet some stinging nettle, aromatic herbs; sage, thyme, and rosemary as a symbol of spring coming upon us. Apart from our feet having the brunt of pain, this pagan ritual did wake us up in style. Our little feet, burning like hell from the stinging nettle, was the sign to get up for us kids to follow the old man, Cufo Brahushi!

With this long wooden stick, holding the red handkerchief, singing the song of St. George's day;

Lazarus, Lazarus,

Do you have any money, for this poor wretch?

[83] Bajram: A Muslim festival.

God's mercy that has befallen us!

May the providence bless you with an egg,

May God bestow upon you a pair of ox.

Who does give me a piece of walnut,

May God bless him with the son.

Who does give me a fig instead,

May God bless him with the tall ship.

He would turn to the housewives with his empty basket accepting the gift that would be given to him. Fascinating that this old wretch in his primordial memory knew the resurrection of Lazarus, from the pangs of death by Jesus, the son of Mary, so all the eggs collected did mean that the memory stayed intact as religion did indeed change.

The stone houses of Ulqin, with the red terracotta roof tiles that we called the Latin name of "tegula" were used in ancient Illyrian and Roman architecture. On rainy days, we would stay under them, open our mouths, wide open like a pelican, fetching fish and see who could catch more droplets of rain; a great way to keep ourselves amused.

The barber shops on the main street were always the main places where the locals would get their news and gossip. It was the norm of the day as only a few places even had a television set. Even our dear neighbor, Mr. Calabrese had this antique radio from Albania "Iliria" that blurted news all day long as there were only two main channels. We remember to this day his golden hands as our barber. Little did we know that he would not take any money from our mum as a sign of respect; we were eternally grateful, even though we didn't like the crew cut he always used.

The market day in our city had the country folk deliver organic food to the market in national attire with the mules and donkeys as

their main transport. It seems a million years away, but this sad reality of a bygone era has changed, and instead of donkey carts, the villagers now use mini vans and tractors. The twenty-first century has not been kind to us. The city that has lost it soul, originality and charm that once characterised this place.

O URBEM VENALEM ET MATURE (BREVI)

PERITURAM,

SI SOLUM EMTORUM INVENERITI (Latin)

A city for sale and ripe for ruin, once it finds a purchaser.

Jason and Argonauts

If the quest for Golden Fleece was Jason's ultimate goal; the city that this Golden Fleece was taken by his Argonauts was ready for the sacrifice of a different kind.

Feast of the Sacrifice would honour the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command in our little town. It meant that all the best rams were groomed for this day, not for slaughter but to fight.

Ram fighting was more than just a fight; it also meant prestige among the owners who would pay a good price in order to show off the status of the particular ram. We would gather around them and with catchy names like Bruce Lee, Muhammad Ali, Tarzan, they had their fair share of supporters. The ring in which the fighting took place was always full of people who loved this bloody sport, and it was not for the faint-hearted as, in many cases, the rams would fight to the death.

Shime, Meto, Shaq, Remzi were the ones that had the rams into the arena that hosted these poor animals instead of gladiators. As kids, we would watch with trepidation and anxiety; if one of our favourite ram would lose in the end, he was destined for slaughter. We never understood all the fuss around these festivities, but we did wonder many years later if the curse of Jason who stole the Golden Fleece with the help of Medea was the curse that these rams endured on this sad ending to this day.

Earthquake

1979.

Sunday Morning, April 15.

We had the task of getting our neighbour, Ramo, the electrician to fix our plugins and without it, there would be no Sunday TV-binging for us. All night long, the wailing of the stray dogs and noise of cats meowing without any reason made our sleep rather uncomfortable; mixed with the anxiety that we needed the electrician, it made for one hell of a night.

At 7:15, we could just hear this hollow sound, and the room started shaking. Little did we know that we were about to be hit with the most devastating earthquake in the history of Montenegro. It took 136 lives and almost flattened our city to the ground - 6.9 in magnitude, a maximum Mercalli, intensity scale.

The ceiling made of mud, wood and straw started falling on our bed, and we were so annoyed that it was disturbing our sleep that we just covered our heads, oblivious to what was actually happening. Suddenly! Our grandmother, Zoorayah barged into our room, trying to get us to safety, but to no avail… as we would not budge or get up at all.

In the meantime, Mum was trying to get to us, but she was stuck on the ground floor of the house, where the fridge was shaking so much that it was impossible to reach us. As we slowly made our way to get up, joined by our Auntie Bude, the side wall of the house totally collapsed

on our internal stairs.

The mayhem that followed was hard to describe. The neighbourhood that we knew of ceased to exist; the smell of fallen dust, debris and the permanent aftershocks made the situation unbearable.

Uncle Murtagh jumped from the second floor, unharmed. How he survived unscathed was a miracle. On the side of the street, where our room once stood, was the fallen chimney that could have fallen on our heads; it was lying flat in the street. We never knew the answer to the providence of the higher power to this day.

Uncle Fadil made his way from his village on his motorcycle to fetch us to the safety of the open air. But making our way through the grounds of the local hospital were many dead bodies, uncovered, staring at us. The innocence that we had that fateful April day was lost forever.

The Old Town of Ulqin that once stood proud, built by Illyrian Giants, cyclopean stonework, of the highest order later fortified by ruling Venetians, and finally, invading Ottomans today stood in rubble. Would its most famous captive, the Spaniard of Don Quixote fame, Miguel de Cervantes,

Saavadera recognise the place where he was held a slave for five years? He named his main heroine "Dulcinea", and the local population nicknamed him SERVET. Imagine that the citadel that once enslaved him but also gave him the love of his life, today destroyed in ruins …

The Balsha Tower that was once a towering masterpiece could not escape the cruel fate that almost flattened it to the ground. Something of a peculiar nature survived the devastating earthquake; the two "Hebrew altars", more accurately described as niches. One facing north has tiles with six-pointed stars on either side of an opening in the wall, and on the opposite end facing south — the direction of the prayer in Balkan Sephardic synagogues— the niche had the form of tablets of the Law, flanked by representation of flames. It sheltered a ner tamid.[84]

Sabbetai Zvi, a sixteenth century so-called Jewish Messiah, was once imprisoned by the grand vizier, Ahmed Köprülü as he posed a great danger for the Ottoman Empire.

Killing him would have made him a martyr, so instead, he was made an Ottoman keeper of the citadel of Ulqin, the same one that survived his forbidden inscriptions. He was known by the name of Mehmet Dadaj, and that "Dadaj" was derived from "Sabbetai".

The people of Ulqin still remember how Mehmet Dadaj revived a dead child. Legend has it that he told the child not to climb a fig tree, but the curious child did not listen. He fell from the tree to his death. Mehmet[85] felt extremely sorry for the child and even guilty for what had happened. He asked God to take his life and revive the little child much to the bewilderment of the grieving parents. Generation after generation, the people of Ulqin remember this incident and the miracle of how the little creature came back to life.

It would take more than a miracle to rebuild the city that became a ghost town from that fateful day in April. The houses were marked by the severity in damage with either three red lines, meant to rebuild,

[84] Ner tamid: An eternal flame placed by Sabbetai Zvi.
[85] Mehmet: Also known as Sabbetai.

and green ones indicating it was safe to return. All the local population moved 5 km from the city to a camping ground for Polish and Czech workers prior to the earthquake, but was now turned instead, into a safe haven until it was safe enough to return. This was a blessing in disguise, enjoying the free spirt while we were utilising what bonded us as survivors. We needed to forget the pain and, at the same time, enjoy the long sandy beach as a retreat and endless summer that was coming to an end.

The Balsha, Albanian Noble family that ruled from 1355-1421

As the city was left abandoned, the good will of the people eased the pain as the aid poured in from all the corners of the world. One piece of the puzzle was missing.

That puzzle could not be brought as the call we longed for never came. Flamur did not bother ringing us at this most trying time for our mother; the time that circling hyenas started gathering around granny Zoorayah.

The dark clouds of greed were trying to persuade our guardian Angel to surrender the reins, and by this, we mean the "title of the house" to our Uncle Kadri who would have simply left us on the streets without mercy. As fate would have it, our neighbours did lobby for our mother to have the house given to her as a gift, so our mother, would one day transfer it to us. Otherwise, the sharks that encircled her would have left her only grandsons at the mercy of the uncle that worked with a different mindset.

Home Sweet Home

1980.

New Year's Eve, Mum's perseverance against all the odds had achieved the impossible - a new house being built in the ashes of the old, starting anew like the Phoenix resurrected in full glory. Our guardian Angels, as we call both the grandmothers; Zoorayah and Feride, had the privilege of blessing the house-warming. It was a kind celebration of the new beginning.

It was a little house, but to us it looked like a palace of dreams. Watching Mum smiling after so many months of hard work and toil was such a welcoming sight; our house, home sweet home.

Long before Airbnb, the Ulqini households were earning decent money through letting the dwellings to the hordes of tourists that would flock into our tiny city. In that particular year, Ulqin had a bumper season, and people were struggling to find a place to stay. The season would not last long as vying for the tourist money would be fierce. We would use all the tricks of the trade to lure the unsuspecting soul that was being led to a trap, with the promise of rooms with the view to the sea. However, it was simply a mere dungeon, overlooking a busy street.

Oddly enough, our neighbour, Daut Pelivani, the former trapeze artist, was so good at manoeuvring with his words that in one instance, he would even snatch the tourist we had bound for our house.

"Don't go with these two rascals, their house is so tiny compared to mine!!!"

He would taunt the people that were coming with us that the reply he got was so straightforward, "Old man leave the kids alone, as we did not come to buy the house."

That response shut him down to the point that he never bothered us anymore.

Guardian Angel Feride

Granny Feride, as we called her, was our maternal grandmother. She resonated with kindness and goodness, and worshiped the ground we walked on. She was there for us in the most trying times without exception. She loved us without prejudice as only a mother would. Her heart was heavy with the burden of not having the only son-in-law to look after the family; it was a hard pill to swallow. She would often lament saying, "From the living human being, there is a hope", but was there really any hope for us? Being spiritual, she would enlighten us with the wisdom of Rumi, reciting to us at night the verses of his poetry;

Troubled by question all my life,

Like a madman I have been knocking at the door.

It opened!

I had been knocking from inside!

At those times, the poetry of Rumi did not make sense, but as we got older, her words of wisdom was a beacon of light that led us on the straight path.

In her prime, our granny was such a stunner, a rare beauty, and being married to our grandfather, Malik was a mismatch not made in heaven. It would cause Feride lots of grievance and beatings just because of her looks. So many hunting friends would stay overnight but to Malik, they were simply another trigger for jealousy raids that our poor granny endured with stoicism and never uttered a word to anyone.

We later learned all this from her daughter-in-law, who was kind enough to share with us what in today's world would constitute domestic abuse.

Maternal Grandfather Malik

Steeped in tradition of a bygone era, the survivor of Second World War with the shrapnel still in his leg never had the guts to take it off. Stubbornness? Pride? Who knows? It followed him till the day he passed away.

This tiny man in stature never showed his emotions, and we would tease him because of his toothbrush moustache which reminded us of Adolf. He would chase us to rub our cheeks with his prickly hair that made our faces red; he would always catch us and laugh in the end.

His father, Lano made a mint hunting the European ferret. In the golden days, this mink fur was quite a common fashion accessory and paid so well, enough to keep the madams in the posh salons of Europe content and happy. With the proceeds of sales, he bought the land that my grandfather was so proud of, keeping some farm livestock - sheep, chickens, cattle, cultivating corn, vegetables that he sold in the farmers' market.

Not being bilingual in sleepy Ana e Malit[13] was not a big deal, but it was one of those days he would rather forget, as it did cause him a great deal of embarrassment. As some surveyors were measuring the land, he made a "lapsus linguae", a slip of the tongue that made everybody laugh but our grandfather. Saying fugly[86] instead of friend was quite funny;

[86] Fugly: A blend of fucking and ugly.

some school kids heard this and started taunting our grandfather each day they were going to school.

"Fugly, fugly."

This would drive poor Malik nuts to the point of despair, and the kids had the old man ranting and trying to catch them, and it became so much fun that it made the adrenaline rush. Bullying in the schoolyard is dangerous as it can cause lots of harm, but this was the exact thing these kids were doing to our grandad.

As the generation of school kids passed, they kept the taunting going as a form of entertainment but Malik was losing his patience. There is a tipping point in every man's life; the day to take the law into your own hands which is what Malo decided to do. Enough is enough, and as the new breed of kids started stirring him up with decade old taunts, our grandfather got the shotgun and started after the warning to actually shoot them. One of the unfortunate kids got his ass full of shrapnel and

was lucky enough to be alive; the rest started running without looking back.

Our grandfather acted on the promise that he would kill them if they didn't stop. Even as the police came to detain him, he kept repeating.

"I wanted to kill the bastards!"

In his mid-seventies, he went to jail; it was not a new experience for the poor old man, but it was different circumstances this time. Tempers flared to the point that he was ready to kill. His honour staying intact was more important to him than any sentence he was to endure. The little boy survived the shooting and, according to Albanian unwritten Law, the family asked for forgiveness, and the boy's family accepted.

Pomegranate

A song of the past would be overheard in the streets of Ulqin;

"Pomegranate, sweet and soft, summer is about to finish without giving you a taste."

Doctors would agree that this fruit of paradise was medicine for the soul, even Oscar Wilde would title his book "A House of Pomegranates." That sweetness of pomegranate, filled with sourness at the same time, would make the season of pomegranate one of the most fun times in our childhood. As kids, we would thrive going to the neighbour's garden and trying to steal some of pomegranates. The prickly stems would make our hands bleed and our mouths red from the juice. What a joy!

We would fill our bellies with joy. Although we could have our granny bring as many as we wanted, somehow, those from the neighbour's garden were the sweetest. After the pomegranate, the season for chestnuts would follow, then plums, and this strange jujube fruit that is even mentioned in Homer's Odyssey. It has a great taste like date palm.

After the earthquake, the old school was gone, so we had to be moved to the only school that was standing under the walls of the old town that got the brunt of devastation. During recess, we would wonder through the empty abounded streets of our beloved "Kalaya" in the hunt for the sword of Excalibur, the mythical sword of King Arthur, in this case, the King of Albania ScanderBek.[87]

[87] ScanderBek: Lord of Albania (1405-1468).

The volcanic laden shores of the Adriatic Sea would lure us to swim and, apart from the spikes from the sea urchins, enjoying the raw meat of mussels did give us energy for more mischievous behaviour that kept coming.

The first loves were starting to happen as the friendships that formed in those initial years endured to this day. The grasp with reality that was biting us was a distant land. Living in the present was the only thing that mattered.

Walking to "Riva" in Ulqin, known as "Corzo" that every Mediterranean place, would have a short walk about, was the place to be and be seen. As the boys would strut out the feathers to attract the young females, they would do the same walking in perpetual motion, just to show off as we watched on, exchanging the few glances that kept us guessing

and wanting more. As we started to feel the puberty blues, the summer in the small sandy beach, "Rana", was a favourite spot for the locals to hang out until the tourist would totally conquer it in their thousands.

We would dig the sand in our crotch area just to get some relief from our fully erected manhood which had its own mindset as soon a bikini clad girl passed by. As students, we did not excel, rather, we blended into the surrounding mediocrity. That kept us lying low, and as long as the acne did not flare up, we would call that a good day, not to mention the run to the only bathroom in the house to have reprieve that would end with one of us waiting up to eight hours; that bathroom became a sanctuary of privacy.

Naim liked his hair styled like Elvis, while mine would be "au natural" …Simply, I could not be bothered as we did start showing the growing pains; as our height was above average, people started noticing us.

High School Blues

1984.

Sarajevo, Winter Olympic Games, the first to be held in the socialist state coincided with us being in Year 9, or as we would call it, the first year of high school. All the friendships that were cultivated for eight years were coming to an abrupt end as the class got separated. Our heart was racing for the same girl, Teuta, and she was in our classroom.

As Torvill and Dean would ice skate to Olympic glory to Maurice Ravel's Bolero, that had us glued to the TV sets. Only ten years later, we would see the Cellist of Sarajevo, Vedran Smailović, playing the same piece to pay homage to the city that was being besieged by war in Bosnia.

Staying put in the classroom was a nightmare of sorts as testosterones created havoc in our developing brains. Some of the teachers showed more flesh than our hungry eyes could handle, and it made the task of learning impossible.

The school was named under the socialist doctrine parole/slogan "Brotherhood and Unity". Oddly enough, the school still stands to this day as the symbol of derelict and neglect. Vandalising the classrooms, escaping from the lectures to sneak a kiss in the toilet made the experience enticing, but learning was the agenda, and we were least interested, and it was not for our lack of trying. Learning about Marx and Engels

and the benefits of the socialism had little impact on our heads, but was more of an excuse to pretend that we were there only in body as our minds were wandering under the skirt of the girl next door. Rare examples of good teaching were not encouraged as the system thrived on the new person, "über mensch", that they were creating; the dumber the better for the country.

Our favourite pastime was getting the teachers out of their comfort zone. We would zoom between the stocking of our favourite teacher, Liljana, hoping she would notice my erect manhood, trying to masturbate, almost in her sight. This would end with me being expelled from the lecture, but my smiley face showed a happy ending of sorts.

The Real School

At the ripe age of fifteen, we started our apprenticeship in the hotels of Ulqin; what we would consider the real learning curve, as you had to either learn fast or be taken for a fool. Grandfather Malik would always tease Mum as we had never shown any initiative before, and the day we would bring any money home, our wage, would be a sight to behold and cause for celebration.

My first working experience was the hotel "Albatross", and it is still bewildering why they would name the hotel after a bird that ancient mariners consider bad luck, as Coleridge's poem would highlight.

Ah! Well a day! What evil
Looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the
Albatross
About my neck was hung.

I had a good thing going as the older staff would show me the tricks of the trade, and on the other hand, my dear twin brother was at the other end of the city, working with nudes[88], and helping uncle Kadri with fishing at night. As Naim was not interested in fishing, he used the

[88] My twin brother was working at the Nudist resort.

little shack near the River Buna to lose his virginity in style. Coming of Age was a huge thing those days as you get to join "the Seagull Club".

Seagulls are pretty intrepid scavengers that thrive on human leftovers, but in Ulqin, it really meant being a Romeo. So, becoming a playboy during the summer months required a set of skills; one of which was being young for a start. An open white shirt, hairy chest out, dark sunglasses, oily hair would set you to approach any unsuspecting female that deemed suitable enough to woo. As the term "seagull" was borrowed from our northern neighbours in Croatia, apart from having strong legs, knowledge of a foreign language was a prerequisite that paid dividends. In the end, as long as you remembered all the white lies that you would toss around just to achieve the final conquest, it would lift your status among your fellow seagulls.

1986.

As summer came to an abrupt end, our last year in High School was a blur.

Graduation night, the night with our besties who meant the world to us; a special breed, a bond that will never be broken. Little did we know that it would all come to an end; sooner than we anticipated. That night, we also had a gift from our long-lost father, through his friend who was from Ulqin. He gave us the first $100 in our entire life…to hold something of a tenure. We were dumbfounded but happy at the same time that we had some extra cash to spend on the same night that all was different.

Being a teenager in the former Yugoslavia meant that you were required to attend the Army, a recruitment camp that would signal that you were ready to serve when given the call of duty. It was a surprise call for us as we were born in Sydney, but that did not deter the state to have us on the list. Naim was exited to attend the camp as the propaganda machine of the state was in overdrive, picturing all with rose colour

glasses that made everything look so enticing and fun.

Our cousin, Sead, in the city of Herzeg – Novi, was getting ready for the big day to become a soldier in Tito's Army. The farewell party would be so ravish and exuberant, full of turbo-folk music, that it was considered the most important call in your life as it signified that you had now become a man.

This invitation came with no warning; drinking, and an empty stomach do not mix well. As I was singing the songs of joy, Cousin Murat was burning his shirt as a sign that his son was about to fulfil the most important duty in his life. The toast kept coming thick and fast, and I had no idea that you were not to raise your glass at each toast, so by the end of the night, I was blind, as Aussies, would say when you get so drunk that you don't remember much the next day. What I do remember though, is the biggest hangover, the feeling that thumping of the head as alcohol, that was wreaking havoc. It welcomed me into a world that would never be same.

The Land Down Under

1988.

As the prophecy of an old sage predicted, we were bound to move from Ulqin. It is up to me, Naim, to now retell the story of how this came about.

Being born in Sydney gave us the automatic right by birth to an Australian passport; that for us was a golden ticket to a better life, but more for Sami, that leap of faith that would set him on the trip to find our long-lost father, Flamur/Freddy. Twins and separation anxiety don't go well together; it was hitting me hard, but I pretended that it was all fine while burning from the inside.

The big day was coming soon, and as the sleepy town of Ulqin was learning of his imminent departure, so were our hopes of finding the father that never was. For someone that was not even 18 years old, this would be a traumatic experience to say the least, especially for a tight-knit family and community like ours. But things that are put in motion can't be undone.

The winds of war felt in the air as the strongman of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, was propagating his idea of blind nationalism that would, in the end, destroy the dream of a unified Yugoslavia; the treatment of Albanians was at boiling point.

I was fed up with all this hatred that the media was blasting every

day, so I decided to tear up the only document that did matter in Yugoslavia, my personal I.D as a sign of rebellion, but it turned out to be a costly mistake.

Cold Adriatic, winds, the "BURA" as it's commonly known, were starting to give me chills in my bones that were combining with the jitters of my imminent departure. As the main heating in winter, the houses in Ulqin still use a wood-burning stove of solid metal that is used for cooking as well. That chilling February, our house was getting busy with the well-wishing family and friends who had come to bid me farewell. Both my grandmothers were there that night as well, as we were getting ready to embark the train from Bar to Belgrade, 521 km away.

With mixed trepidation, at the hour of my departure, my grandmother, Zoorayah, started hugging me and fell to the ground to kiss my feet. She was becoming hysterical as we were about to exit the house, and said;

"I am about to lose you as well."

I was trying to reassure her that finding her son and my father will be my mission and my promise to her.

"You will not find me here next time you come; I know."

That certainty in her eyes, the way she said to me while trying to bless my trip with some water, a splash as a sign of good luck, tore my heart apart. Looking back was not an option as my travelling companions would ease my pain: Mum, my twin, Uncle Murtagh with his dashing moustache, the Cousin Kadri that knew Belgrade well made the trip more bearable.

We arrived the day before my departure to Sydney and stayed at the Hotel Slavija, and the first problem arose. As I was the only person not to have the local ID, the price to pay at the hotel was double. As I only had my Australian passport to show, my angry looks towards my twin who'd torn up the local document did not make things easier.

At that fateful morning, even our old family friend, Dušan Radulović, came as a sign of respect to wish me goodbye. This old Montenegrin, old captain who had served under Tito's Second World War partisans, today had teary eyes as he was not used to showing emotion. Getting ready to depart Mum in tears, both uncles as well, apart from Naim, kept his stamina to make it easy for me. Suddenly, the lady from the counter of JAT[89] airways smiled at me,

"Passport Please?"

Here it is. I flashed my brand-new Australian passport…

"So …where did you obtain this passport?!"

"At the Australian embassy in Belgrade", I murmured under my teeth.

"I don't see any exit visa from your local authorities!"

My twin was approaching the desk, reassuring, with his photo ID that it was all good, but things were starting to turn ugly. Without a valid exit visa in my passport, I couldn't show that I was a citizen of Montenegro, and the checkout lady simply cancelled my ticket on the spot as I was not able to prove my links to the country where I'd lived almost all my life. The glimmer of hope was that if I could obtain a Yugoslav passport, I would be able to leave the country.

Uncle Murtagh had some links in the passport office, but it would take a week till any passport could be issued, so the old wolf Dušan offered me his welcome home. As the family departed to Ulqin, that first cold night in Belgrade, it hit me hard as I finally was letting my emotion loose, creeping under the heavy blanket that "teta Vida" had given me. She opened my bedroom door to check if I was ok, but my uncontrolled sobbing gave me away…at the same time, Mum would confess many years later that she felt me and saw me in her dream, crying as she woke up sobbing as well, calling my name.

[89] JAT: Yugoslav Air Transport.

I had the privilege to have a friend like Dušan who showed me the Belgrade streets, reminiscent of the days he and my grandfather, Jamal were strolling the same alleys in the "Skadarlija".[90] Dušan was made from old stock; he never had any hatred for Albanians as his tribe originated from Komani, and in Albania, proper blood was thicker than water. After a week, my new Yugoslav passport was ready. Dušan's son-in-law, Branko, who married his only daughter Vesna, the unsung bride that Uncle Murtagh should have married as she had the angelic looks, managed to fork me a ticket that it would set me toward the city of my birth. Sydney, here we come…

[90] Skardarlija: The district that bore the name of Albanian city of Shkodra.

Welcome Home Mate

As the Australian Bicentenary was marked by pomp and glory celebrating the arrival of the first fleet of British ships in 1788, at the same time, my plane was descending at Kingsford Smith Airport. My new made friend, the Australian Olympic swimmer, Rob Woodhouse, was pointing out the iconic Harbour Bridge to me. It was surreal, simply breathtaking, and to this day, it never ceases to amaze me.

Approaching the entry at the border, I was greeted by the officer,

"Welcome Home Mate!"

This feeling of unease was gone, and like magic, I felt free after so many years back in the country of our birth that only some shaded photos to rekindle our memories kept the fire burning. I guess I was about to start anew.

My uncle, Sam, who so many years back, had initiated the move that my dad made after pleading with him to come was now welcoming his seed that he barely knew. In his mind, he was the son of his dad. How did my sister raise these boys? They are men now…who knows… little to my surprise, the welcoming committee consisted of almost all the Albanians that lived in Sydney to welcome me the unknown…an overwhelming feeling that was broken when my lovely cousins, Medina and Lumi, gave me this big bouquet of native Australian flowers that officially signalled, "Sydney, here I am." I took my first ride in the diminutive, dark blue 1980 Holden Commodore.[91]

My first trip out of Ulqin, the suburbia of middle-class Australia totally fascinated me as something weird and interesting at the same time. My idea of Sydney were movies, the TV-series; Return to Eden, All the Rivers Run, The Thorn Birds, with iconic Richard Chamberlain, the Harbour Bridge, kangaroos, roaming free, not front yards with backyard barbecues, and these funny rotary clothes hoists that were revolving.[92] People mowing lawns with garden hoses that spurted the water in the street, and after seven a clock at night, no soul was to be found alive.

All watching the local news broadcast religiously on Channel 2, Channel 7, Channel 9, and 10, not having a clue why would they have all this TV without proper names in the way was an insult to my intelligence.

I was baffled at the lack of sidewalk cafes, no people dropping in for an espresso unannounced, cousins, aunts and uncles piling in and out of each other's homes. I remember hearing,

[91] Holden Commodore: An Australian mid-size car.
[92] Gilbert Toyne, Australian inventor.

"Do Australians have community?"

They don't dine together, they don't break bread together, how do they talk to each other? Don't they have any friends?" I guess indulging in too many movies back home could not prepare the 17-year-old kid to understand the Australian way of life, but I had to learn fast climbing the ropes or be eaten by the sharks that roamed free in human form.

The mission to find our long-lost father was paramount in my mind, and I had one deterrent: I was utterly and completely broke. My uncle knew that the honeymoon period was over and that the time for me to look for work would be a step further in order to find my dad. The Southern hemisphere did spin me out as even the sky looked higher than that of home. I was starting to have heart palpitations, and I was missing my family which dampened my mood. The first order of business was to legally change my first name, which in that drunken stage of happiness, my father blurted as Sanie[93], not Sami, which did cause me many unnecessary fights that did not end well each time.

And before all this, my uncle organised a trip to "Kings Cross", which in the 1960s to 1980s Sydney's Kings Cross, with so many strip joints that toothless bouncers would entice you to get in and see the strippers that were half dead, dancing like zombies. It was named the Golden Mile for its infamous brothels, organised crime and police corruption. Some of the strippers were so old they could hardly stand from drug use, and abuse. To witness that sorry sight was a sin! The smell of urine and alcohol, no glamour of posters and magazines…

I guess my uncle left Ulqin in the early 60s. There were no nudist resorts then and no tourist coming naked that looked so much enticing, but who was I to refuse a night out; complaining was out of the question.

The majority of new arrivals worked menial jobs in factories, and the overtime was a thing to be desired, as paying a mortgage loan that these new migrants or simply one word that would say ALL! "Wogs".[65] We were doomed from the word go.

[93] Samie: A girl's name.

Even the word mortgage derives from a term used in the Middle Ages, meaning "death pledge", and for many, it was a trap without an end in sight as losing your job meant you could lose your house, and if you lost your house, you lost everything. Observing all this, it became clear to me why not many of them ever made a trip back home as the new reality bit them hard. The only day that these poor souls would have a day off usually consisted of visiting each other's homes and dwelling on the bygone era, reminiscing about the past, and this will be like a revolving door for years on end.

Being sad is one thing, but I felt petty and could not understand my life. Why don't they explore the pubs, the harbour, fish & chip shops? God forbid you would see a migrant giving their children a potato chip in white bread, but the answer was always simple; that's the Aussie way! Not us…

Looking for Work and Praying to Find None

Being young has its perks, but being young and stupid made a lethal combination that was not taking me anywhere.

Watching Neighbours, and by this, I do not imply the people, but the TV series that glued most of the Australians in the late 80s. At one point, the shooting of JR in "Dallas" in USA TV was rivalled by the soap wedding to end all soap weddings, between Neighbours' favourites, Scott Robinson[94] and Charlene Mitchell.[95] It was watched by millions around the word, and it captivated me as well. Even the Holy Trinity church in Doncaster to this day is a major tourist destination.

Being a couch potato, or finding a job was the question now! Not being fond of Shakespeare, it doesn't mean I will not borrow his quote. The patience of my aunt, Elma grew paper thin. She had promised my mum that she would look after me for adding another child to her flock. I was determined this time to persevere to start looking at least.

As we kept driving and stopping at various factories, we were filling out meaningless paper work for jobs that I was not only suited for, but jobs that also required minimal experience that I did not possess. Persistence does pay off, so finally I got called for my first trial. The meat pie factory, Big-Ben, which is considered iconic food, and is the nearest

[94] Scott Robinson: A fictional character played by Jason Donovan.
[95] Charlene Mitchell: A fictional character played by Kylie Minogue.

Australia and New Zealand have to the national dish, was my first job. As my aunt dropped me off, I was so happy that for once, I was out of the house and have a taste of what work means.

As I entered the premises, the mere size of the factory floor all in white looked like a Willy-Wonka chocolate factory, except that I was given this white overall and big gum boots. Here we go.

My introduction started by this Schwarzenegger type in a heavy German accent,

"My boy! 'ziis' meat unpack 20 kg, zeen from the cool roââm, straight, into the cauldron, 'zaat' would mix 'mitt' 'zee' sauce."

Wait a minute, is this for real!!! No, it can't be… I thought I was in prison. I was totally unprepared, and it was a shock to the system, the understatement of the century. My poor German boss looked at me with teary eyes and advised me to learn English, so I don't end up on that floor with the rest of them.

Nice! I ended up getting the first bus back to the house while my auntie was chitchatting with her sister about me and my work. After three hours, I was back home, surprising them to say the least. Let's say they went into hysterical laughter.

As the laughter persisted, I didn't know whether to cry, so I joined in the chorus. Not being left out was important, even though they were laughing at me.

A Baptism of Fire, my first genuine attempt to work, ended in disaster, so I thought…

Knowing my luck, this would not last, and it did not as my uncle was telling my sorry tale to this Croatian painter who felt pity for me, and then agreed to take me on as an apprentice.

Mr. Damjan Gacić, this mountain of a man with a soft soul, started explaining how to hold the brush, mix the colour, clean the brushes,

etc. To me, all this was like hearing a distant voice from the bushes of outback Australia, as my interest in becoming a painter equaled zero. Damjan realised that my interest played somewhere else, and he would blame the Montenegrin sun as it made me lazy, and my only hope was to continue my schooling.

The 10 Montenegrin Commandments

1. Man is born tired and lives to get a rest.

2. Love thy bed as you love thyself.

3. Rest during the day, so you can sleep at night.

4. Do not work-work kills.

5. If you see someone resting, help him out.

6. Work as little as you can, and convey all the work you can to another.

7. In shade is salvation - nobody died from resting.

8. Work makes you sick - do not die young.

9. If you have an urge to work, sit down, wait and it will pass.

10. When you see people eat and drink - approach them.

When you see them work, withdraw yourself not to trouble them.

As we parted, I was forever grateful that he did pay me $100 per day for doing nothing.

The Hoover factory was my next attempt to get employment. I was adamant this time to not disappoint my uncle, as he'd started doubting my willingness to work and, at the same time, start earning for my future. Enough was enough.

Working as a process worker, being the only born Australian to be given a chance as the majority of the workers were of Vietnamese background, and goodness me, did they work fast! That fast, in fact that I managed to stuff up the entire line of washing machines which were being assembled. That day, production was halted, and I was the culprit. Even this job was way above my league. I came home as a stunned mullet, my self-belief at a low point. I had serious self-doubt about my ability to ever find a job.

How a kid only 17-years-old who had been dropped from a province of Ulqin, could try to establish himself in the murky waters of a city like Sydney, was still a mystery to me, as my appearance gave away a much older person, due to my 193 cm[96] frame.

The old friend of my father came to visit me, this tiny man in his 60s. He wanted to meet as he tried to confess all the dirty deeds that they'd engaged in the early days. I was starting to get a fuller picture of a man we hardly remembered, let alone knew.

The days on end playing cards, being penniless and drinking to drown the sorrows of losing a month's wages in one night. Zef Deda had a story to tell, and he did it well as he escaped the pangs of communism from his beloved Albania. He was still suffering from post-traumatic stress of his torture at the hands of Albanian Dictator, Enver Hoxha's[79] henchmen, his hands shaking.

"My dear Son, your dad was not an angel,
but don't expect that he
will make a first move…
I know him too well,
he is dead broke, and
too proud to admit it."

[96] 193cm: 6 foot 3.

Hearing all this, it made no sense at all why our mother never mentioned this to us. I was bewildered and shaken at the same time. My idealistic view that my father would come and find me evaporated in the thick smoke of Zef's cigarettes.

As we parted, he left a wedding invitation that my uncle was kind enough to include me in as well, and this was a stroke of luck, as I ended up getting a job I was capable of doing, that of a waiter.

The City of Ulqin smiled at me, as this is where I learned the ropes of my trade. Being a waiter at the wedding ballroom centre, my luck started to turn for the better. The Crystal Ballroom in West Ryde, was owned by a Calabrian, family. The oldest son, Rocky Pilo, was the boss who understood my predicament. He would give all the hours of the day even peeling potatoes, and refusal was not an option. As long as I never saw a factory floor again in my life, anything to do with hospitality I took with open arms.

Talking about a Revolution

(Tracy Chapman)

Don't you know
They're talkin' 'bout a revolution
It sounds like a whisper
Poor people gonna rise up
And get their share
Poor people gonna rise up
And take what's theirs…

As the soulful voice of Tracy Chapman's song was blasting through the speakers of the Ballroom centre, I was mopping the cold and darkened polished floor with the rhythm of the song. My mind was far away, back where even the stones know me, where even the birds were chirping my name. Nostalgia was gripping my heart. Listening to Tracy, I was just another number in the story of countless migrants that did survive without the identity; always an outcast. As long as your name sounded foreign, you were reminded that this was not your land.

Then one day, the dreaded phone call from Ulqin came. At the other end of the line was my twin, his voice trembling.

"Grandmother is dead."

Silence, despair, silence from my end. I could barely utter any words …

At that moment, I felt like the loneliest person on the planet. I locked myself in the room and started sobbing uncontrollably. My guardian Angel, my "Noona" was gone, and it was piercing my soul. I could not keep the promise, and it was a low point in my life. As the people of good will were coming to pay respects for my grandmother, I knew the time had come to finally face my dad. Now that Zoorayah was dead, I was feeling her presence, encouraging me to make the trip. It had become a prerogative that I had to fulfil.

I had a contact of this Bosnian guy, Hajro[97] Turčinović, who knew my dad. He was almost 4,000 km away in Townsville, North Queensland.

I call it a lifetime away, but in the vast continent like Australia, those distances were backyard stuff with no one to complain. Australia in summer is hot and dry, but the north of the country is particularly harsh. The sun glares down from on high, and the humidity is so thick you can almost see it — but there is no cloud in the sky and no sign of relief. People are angry, irritable and feel as though the tiniest thing might send them into a frenzy.

All these are symptoms of "Going Troppo".[98] It's the mental trait that follows these proud people.

[97] Hajro: Harry.
[98] Going Troppo: Short for Tropical.

Lost and Found

So, my dear Sami, the stage is set. As an uncle, my obligation to you is to accompany you on this trip…as my uncle kindly made himself available, I knew deep down that this was me, Alone, with Alone. Townsville, here I come; only if I knew it.

Deluxe buses that will go bust just in two years became my home away from home. The trip was long and treacherous, with stops too far in between Brisbane, Rockhampton, Mackay… how many towns to go? There was no end to this… I was not prepared to have such a long haul that many backpackers were thoroughly enjoying.

My head was restless, gripped by the fear of unknown. Did he get the message? Will he be waiting for me? All these questions would keep me awake while everybody else was fast asleep. As the bus was making its way to Townsville, the driver passing Guthalungra warned me that we were not far away from the final stop as I was one of a handful passengers left.

Apart from an old photograph that looked like George Clooney, I had nothing else to give any edge. The morning dust in the sleepy bus station of Townsville was settling down, and I noticed from the window of my bus a short and stocky man in white shirt and brown pants, cigarette in hand, nervously pacing up and down the waiting bay. This creature was more like a phantasm than my imaginary father…he can't be this old, as he had just turned 49 years old. His appearance was that

of a much older man, and me, just 18.

Trying to gather my belonging, making my way down the stairs, he just stood there…his eyes, firmly on mine;

"So, you look like a young version of your uncle, my Son!"

Trepidation in that moment, my heart racing, my stomach churning in knots. Is this what I envisaged all my life for this moment…I just muttered back,

"And you Dad, an older version, of your uncle Shab Rama!"

That he idolised in his younger days and had as his confidant after grandfather Jamal passed away. The life had not been not kind to our father that I'd just met, fulfilling the promise of my grandmother. My dad just stood there in disbelief that the son who he'd farewelled from the shores of Sydney, at age two and a half is today a man, standing in front of him his flesh and blood.

"You can spit! In the air, it may hit your forehead!

You can spit! Down, it will hit you down the belly!

This is who I am! Your dad."[99]

Anticlimax, not a Hollywood, slow motion; this poignant moment was heavy, mixed with the relentless heat and my cold sweat betraying the stillness of the moment.

"I can borrow some money, and you can stay at the Townsville, the best hotel" was his opening remark.

"Dad, if I wanted to stay in hotel, I would have done it. All I want is to stay where you are if is not too much of an ask."

He stayed at the boarding house in which each resident occupies a room and shares a bathroom, kitchen, dining room with other residents. He felt that me coming from the middle-class suburbia of my uncle's house would be an unwelcome sight, a turn off. It did not bother me in the slightest. All I wanted to know was who my real father was. I had only a week at my disposal as my boss in Sydney was adamant that a longer stay would make me lose my job, the reality of the times.

The place he stayed was in such disrepair and full of shady characters that were "Felliniesque"[100], in my mind a little doubt? Did I do the right thing? Was this a mistake?

A short man with a goatee beard and calves fully tattooed exclaimed,

"Freddy, is this your bambino! Your Son?

He turned to me asking me, "Do I look tired to you?"

What the hell is going on? I just looked at him, and he kept going.

"Mike is my name. You see when my father, came from Calabria, he and my mamma worked very hard."

[99] Baba: An indigenous name for "Dad".

[100] Felliniesque: Frederico Fellini; Italian film director.

So hard in fact by this stage, big hands of Mike in his head was showing the sleepy motion. “I was born tired!”

The way he said it made me laugh and broke the tension that was building up. Big Mike, as he was known, knew how to crack a joke or two. I guess being so hot, it does something to these wrecked souls. As I was entering the room where my dad was sleeping, I thought that a tsunami had ransacked the place. No bed, except for a mouldy mattress, belongings in plain plastic bags, cigarette butts litter scattered everywhere, open tuna cans that did not smell too good …Our first night together in the room that if it had a voice to tell the tales, it would… The deafening silence was only broken by big Mike’s miniature bull terrier named “TYSON.”

This is My Son

For the last twenty years, Townsville was on and off my dad's home town. Everybody in this sleepy town of North Queensland knew Flamur; to them, he was simply Freddy.

As he was showing me his favourite pub, Captain James Cook, face staring at me and his Irish friend Peter Lyon, so happy to see his old mate.

"Pete, this is my son!"

"Fuck me dead!

Freddy, you far out old cunt.

I thought you were lying to me all these years, let me look at the lad. It's my shout of Guinness! Bloody oath mate…"

Sláinte!

It means health in Gaelic, so a toast to you, Sami! This was my introduction to the pub scene as I took a liking to the dark beer with the white froth and the bitter taste, which, after a pint[101] or two, became sweeter by the moment.

Being drunk, as Aussies say, having a cold one, gave me my dad in full glory; his real nature of him being pissed-drunk. My head was spinning, not only from Guinness, but also breaking down the illusion

[101] A pint: 473ml.

of how my dad had lived all these years. We thought he was politically involved and could not come home; he was in the long line of many broken men that did lose their way.

"Drink for everybody!"

He was shouting all the pub as his son was finally with him… The seedy faces in the pub were not used to this sudden generosity and would exclaim.

"Freddy! Did you win a lottery mate?!"

"Keep your mouth shut, you sons of the bitches! I am the son of Jamal Rama, and you should bloody know it."

He was totally devoid of any reason, his mind firmly in the bygone era when he was somebody; today a lost soul, the alcohol drooling from his face that was battered beyond recognition.

"Give me some money my son, as we need to cover all this."

Thirty plus years in Australia, and he was asking me for money. Who was he kidding?

What will my story be when I finally break the news to my brother and mother dearest, who were waiting for any news of our encounter with bated breath.

As we staggered from the pub, he wanted to buy some cigarettes.

"I can't stay without tobacco. Since I was thirteen, I have been smoking. My dad, your grandfather Jamal, and my uncle Shab are the culprit."

It is a filthy habit; I'm so glad you don't smoke but get me a packet of Benson & Hedges Super Filter. Coughing up the money that I'd earned while working at the Crystal Ballroom made me sick to the stomach, but I had little choice as letting him down by refusing would not achieve nothing that he did not know yet.

As the night drifted away, his head in a rare moment of clarity, he started the confession that all those years wasted, all those lonely nights without the family in sight and now, even the mother that loved him so unconditionally gone as well…having so much in his chest to be able to just let it go, we did cry together, not tears of joy but lamenting the past that couldn't be taken back.

My stay in Townsville was coming to an end, apart from a few days where I took the freedom to just be myself on an island near Townsville, Magnetic Island would be great escapism, not only for the natural beauty it possessed but also a little fling with the cute backpacker from Manchester, even though I did not understand a word she was saying. It made me forget the heavy burden of finding Flamur, such a broken man.

Returning to Sydney, the same bus station that only a week ago played such an important part in this puzzle called life; now had my dad all alone wishing me farewell. We had got reacquainted, but there were also unexplained feelings of regret that I was leaving him, knowing full well that I needed to go back. My heart ached at the prospect that this may be the last time that I lay eyes on him…

"Promise me that you will not forget me", he wanted me to promise…lost and found. As I was boarding the Deluxe Bus, I said to him, "I shall see you again, that's my promise". I can still see his eyes, longing for a glimpse more as the bus was making the final turn. The tears started rolling down my cheeks as a reminder that this was my dad after all.

Return to Eden

I had more questions than answers. Where did it all go wrong? Every living soul wanted my story, but I felt that if I tell the truth, I would betray the certain image we all had of Flamur that had been dead for a long time, and Freddy of Townsville was nothing but.

Sydney, prior to me finding Freddy/Dad was an exciting place to be as Christmas was approaching. Rocky from the Ballroom centre had few plans for how to best organise the parties to come as we would get ready for the busiest time in the calendar; from getting the lobsters from Pyrmont, to Sydney's main Fish market and similar delicacies. My mind was not in the Eden that I created, but to the Eden that I was longing to return, my city of Ulqin.

After Townsville, nothing was the same. The migrants, "Wogs", a slang, racial slur the Anglo-Saxon Australians used for Southern Europeans, as well as that of "dago" that originated with the first European migrant arrivals and their lack of English skills. When asked how their day was, the response was "Day-Go good", so it stuck - dago.

So many of them wasted all their lives doing jobs that they hated in the perpetual chase for a dollar. The family as the cornerstone by this time was starting to wane as these new Aussies became more integrated into the Australian way of life. I just wanted OUT! And it was a decision that my mother dearest approved of, even though my twin had different ideas of western society and how it functioned. My mindset to return, not even after a full year of stay and spend New Year's Eve of 1989 among my family was done and settled.

When I broke this news to my uncle, they were shocked but, in the end, relieved as even though my stay in the house and the welcome they gave to me was noble; a learning curve that will be forever imprinted in my memory, nothing could replace home.

As my days in Sydney were getting numbered, I decided to get this wonder of the box, the first VCR[102] JVC the brand from the Duty-Free Shop. Only 599 Australian dollars, it was a bargain indeed.

The JAT[89] McDonnell Douglas DC-9 was ready for take-off. For the second time, I was leaving Sydney which had welcomed me with open heart, not knowing if I would ever see him again. Never say never.

[102] VCR: Video Cassette Recorder.

Taxi

The long haul flight from the southern hemisphere to Europe is never a pleasant trip, but I was about to join the mile-high club, and that made things considerably easier.

Lady luck was smiling at me as I shared a window seat with a stunning blonde, a top 100 French tennis player, who apart from playing with tennis balls, had something else on her mind as well. The second surprise was sharing the flight with my uncle's brother-in-law, who was going to bring the wedding rings as his cousin had chosen him according to custom to take the ring to the bride-to-be as a token of betrothal.

So at least the part of the trip from Belgrade to the point of our arrival would be easy.

Mr. Ardolli came quite young in Australia from the Kraja region after a personal tragedy that involved a train carriage killing his father. It would leave quite a trauma in his young self that will show quite ominous by the end of this journey. Arriving in Belgrade in the dead of the winter, Surčin Airport[103] was under a heavy blanket of thick fog, and as New Year's Eve was fast approaching, no planes were taking off due to the visibility factor.

Holding my precious cargo, the box of my VCR, meant that our predicament of flying out of Belgrade, was almost non-existent. Being polite, I thought of the train, the same one that got to Belgrade 10

[103] Surčin Airport: Now known as Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade.

months ago would now take me back home, but I stuck at the hurdle, as unbeknown to me, Sylejman, due to his sad history, does not take trains, and there were no buses happening either. Mr. Ardolli suggested a taxi-ride to Ulqin, 544 km about 338 miles away.

As my language skills in Serbian are sufficient enough, I did not know who was foolish enough to actually take us home. A winter drive, the roads unsafe, I started approaching the drivers at the rank, but as soon the drivers would hear Ulcinj, their faces darkened. As I was passing by the end of the rank, this Mercedes-Benz driver, Marko, said that for a fee he would be happy to do it.

Finally, on our way with the ex-rally driver champion who did not take his foot from the pedal all the way down, full steam ahead as a way to impress us. It sent shivers into our spines.

Sylejman, whispered to me, "Keep him busy talking as your VCR is safe in my hand with this crazy driver; we may arrive by the end of the day."

Marko had no idea that he was taking to an Albanian as tensions between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosova were at the crossroads. He expressed the desire to stay overnight at my place, and I was more than happy to oblige. Little did he know.

After all these months being away, I was so happy to see the shores of the Adriatic that to this day is an overwhelming sight- my mum, my twin…The car made its way towards Mehmet Gjyli Street.

Then out of nowhere, the small figure of my other guardian Angel, grandmother Feride in her national Albanian garb came out to welcome us. That's when poor Marko noticed that I was not a fellow Serb but an Albanian from Ulqin.

"Listen my friend."

Marko was trying to excuse himself as he would be move than sleep. I perfectly understood his predicament, and I was grateful that he'd got

us here in one piece. As Marko hurried his taxi out of my sight, I felt the warm embrace of my grandmother. That New Year's Eve, together again, as pomegranate seeds, we welcomed in 1989.

Beginning of an End

1989.

The miners knew their battle was coming to an end. They laid listless and hungry in the dark on the floor of a narrow tunnel, 850 meters below the earth. The temperature hadn't dropped below 50 degrees Celsius for seven long, punishing days and nights.

And now the clean water was gone.

The Kosovar Albanian miners had called their underground strike as a protest at the treatment of their countrymen. Serbia's nationalist

leader, Slobodan Milošević, was asserting historic Serbian claims over the autonomous province of Kosovo.

As the images of 1300 miners were being rushed to hospital from the hunger strike, with images beaming from all the major TV and paper outlets in the world, it was the beginning and the end of Yugoslavia as we knew it.

In this context, the 1989 Trepça miners' strike was a watershed moment. In its aftermath, ethnic Albanians were purged from employment in every state sector.

The state of emergency would strip the powers from all the political structures in Kosovo, and in this climate, the start of the year from the relative ease of Australian life to the winds of war that were being felt was an unwelcome change that I did not crave.

Twin brothers share so many things in common - genetic code for one, 99.99 the same, but my trip to Australia had created a little schism that would come to haunt me in the years to come.

Mum was happy that I'd returned although in the beginning, her smothering annoyed me. Naim, on the contrary loved it. I felt like I was being treated like a child, it was time to grow up.

The VCR was working in overdrive as we were enjoying the first porn cassettes, the exploits of Ron Jeremy, John Leslie, Traci Lords, Ginger Lynn and co. Most of my friends were stoked at the chance to see movies out of the cinema environment that it became a hit as video-recorders were few and need so extensive. The word in the street was clear that any ideas for both of us to further our studies in Kosova was out of the question, so the outlet that was open for us overnight got shut abruptly in our faces.

Even though the Sydney trip was an eye opener, the shock that endured the way I encountered our dad did dampen my spirits to never return back down under. A chance, albeit innocent snub, not out of

malice but simple misunderstanding would set the chain of the events that would push us to the brink and back. At the army headquarters just sorting out some documents, we ignored one of the unnamed officials who wanted to send us both to the army as we had dual citizenship. The state had the power to invoke this requirement that would trigger the first desertion from the army that was punishable by law.

We were both selected to be in commando units in Sarajevo, and JNA[39] for Albanians. It was starting to be a death trap, and many youngsters never returned from active service. Assumption is the mother of all fuck ups! So, after my passport mishap the previous year due to Naim being overzealous with certain local ID papers, we had the military police asking for our Yugoslav Passport, which I dutifully gave to my neighbour, Teuta to be handed to them. I did not relinquish the Australian passport; then, in order to leave the country, we needed an exit visa.

So Long… Ulqin

Mum had no qualms about one thing and that was the fact that, by any means possible, we had to get out of the country as the situation was worsening by the day. To get an exit visa in the Australian passport requires the trip to the interior department that is in the vicinity of the military offices. We decided to go for a bluff and see if we could get away.

With mum's blessing, we knocked at the door, and the friendly face of Mr. Ivo Mučalica somehow got us at ease.

"So, boys, Ramovic's ok! Is Murtagh any relation to you?!"

"Yes sir! He is our uncle, and he just left for the USA." We tried to chit-chat our way of this mess.

"He is a good man", Ivo exclaimed, and he started reminiscing as they used to play cards and drink together.

"So…" we started slowly, "…we would like an exit visa out of the country for a trip to Germany, if possible!"

"We can do that, but do you boys have any outstanding duties with the Army?"

"No, dear God?!" Both of us said in unison; "We are Australian citizens so that excludes us from any call of duty."

"Then boys, let's set this in motion. As long as you promise to get

me a small camera for personal use, I wish you a safe trip and return."

With our visas in our pocket, we knew the time was of the essence, and we had to leave Ulqin the same night. With heavy hearts, out of nowhere, some of our friends started trickling in our home wishing us farewell, as being the first deserters, things had to be kept under wraps.

The money was an issue as we only had enough to get us one-way tickets to Sydney with the German carrier Lufthansa that was leaving Belgrade the very next day. The train Station in Bar, a Deja-vu of sorts; I never imagined so soon after my return to Ulqin that I would now be leaving with my twin brother, my comrade in arms.

A familiar face smiled at us, the same person we met a few months earlier at the army offices was travelling with us. Rasim was an honest man, so either way we decided to confess and tell him the true purpose of our trip as he was visiting his dying brother in Belgrade. He wished us well, and as he departed for hospital, we left for Belgrade's Surčin Airport.[103]

Did we do well that we told him? Would he give us up to authorities? All this was bothering us, till we arrived at the departures. This time, Naim took the first step towards the check-in counter, and as the passport was being checked by a local staff, he lifted his head and calmly asked,

"Where did you get this passport?"

"Australian Embassy in Belgrade, Sir", Naim politely answered. Then, without further ado, he looked at me as well.

"So, your passport is the same?"

"Yes! Indeed." As the cold sweat hit my forehead, we both had our boarding passes in our hand. I was saved by the whisker, as on the last page of my passport was the departure stamp from Sydney, but no entry stamp, as I did enter with a different passport; that of Yugoslavia confused enough.

The feeling of exuberance gripped us both as we were set to leave, and the voice over the loud speakers, "Final Boarding" was being called just before we were about to enter the boarding, and then it all came to a halt. We knew that our lady luck had run out. Naim was murmuring under his teeth that Rasim had betrayed our trust. This was the end game; there was nothing more that we could do; our cover had been blown, or so we thought.

Out of nowhere, this little man with bags in his hands had delayed our flight and yes! They were waiting for this poor bastard, so by the end of the day, Rasim kept his end of a bargain, but we were so stressed out that he was the only person that knew what we were about to undertake. So relieved, this heavy stone around our necks that had been dragging us down finally lifted as the plane was lifting towards the skies of freedom.

Terra Australis, Terra Promessa

15 May 1989.

With my twin brother in tow, we made our way to "Terra Australis"[54], the way we intended in the first place, as one. This will be a total surprise to everyone, as not even our uncle Shaban knew that we were coming. All my previous knowledge about Sydney did help me to navigate the public system as it can be daunting for a newcomer. I kept a little surprise for my twin as our first stop was not an affluent suburb of Darling Point or Point Piper, but that of the inner-city suburb of Redfern.

In the early and mid-20th century, Australian native people, the Aborigines, or as they were called, "Blackfellas"[104] were forcibly coerced into government reserves most commonly known as "missions".

When the missions began to be disbanded after the Second World War, it forced significant Indigenous migration from the bush[105] to towns and cities, where particularly settled in the Redfern area.

In Redfern, the Aboriginal population was the highest in Sydney, and the area was so derelict that it resembled a third world country. This was the first sight of Sydney that Naim never forgot: the smell of urine in the streets, empty bottles of alcohol scattered; it was a war zone and

[104] Blackfellas: Australian English to refer to Indigenous Australians.
[105] The bush/remote coast in Australia is referred to as Australian outback.

a face of shame. Witnessing the real Australia and the sad state that was in it was an eye opener in a sense and a warning that the sunny shores of Sydney harbour were a far cry from Redfern but so important to see.

We continued toward Parramatta, about 20 kilometres[106] west of Sydney and in the bus, I recognised the familiar face of an older Albanian lady going to work. Naim did not believe it. Out of all the people, I recognised her.

He asked, "So what do you do?"

"I work in office", the poor lady replied.

The word office for the majority of migrants[60] meant only one thing, and it usually involved being a cleaner. Being a cleaner is a noble job, but Naim only had to learn that many years later.

As our auntie was getting ready to take her kids to school, we just showed up out of the blue sky. It was a nice reprieve to be welcomed again by our uncle, but in my mind and soul, Sydney was done. We needed to meet our father and that involved going to Townsville.

Being on a very tight budget money wise, we only had enough to get us there. If ignorance is bliss, we had that in spades. We just went with the flow of the youngsters not being afraid and not knowing if Flamur would even be there. A Townsville Hotel, Grand Chancellor, known locally as the "Sugar Shaker" due to its unusual shape was also the tallest building in the city and was our first stop.

Although almost penniless, we were adamant that staying at the best hotel at the time was a great start to our Townsville story. In a way, we did demolish the bar fridge as we thought that was on the house, free of charge. When they asked us at reception if we'd helped ourselves to the bar, we exclaimed in unison "No way!"

I remembered the place our father would work sometimes from my last trip in Townsville, so we headed that way to see if the old man that

[106] 20 kilometres is equal to 12 miles.

Naim had still not met would be there. Danny La Verde, this Calabrian migrant that had the Quarterdeck Restaurant, just shrugged with his heavy Italian accent,

"Whoo, ask you Freddy go, go, A, Darwin, no… here."[107]

It was a slap in the face as our hopes were dashed that finally, Naim would be able to meet him. As we confessed to Danny about our predicament, he offered us temporary accommodation in his motel that was managed by a lovely Slovenian lady called Lorraine. She took a liking to us as by now, we definitely were destitute.

The room, more of a dungeon that Danny was so gracious to provide for us came with a catch five, with some free labour included. His repayment would be free accommodation that was more suited for his German Shepherd than human habitat, but as the saying goes, "beggars can't be choosers." Being content was a far cry, but we had to do with what we had in hand till we got stronger. It tested our endurance.

The Samuel Beckett famous play, "Waiting for Godot" came to mind, but this time it was, "Waiting for Freddy." As months on end passed, he was nowhere to be seen.

Is he alive? We started to doubt our feelings as our patience was running out. We decided that the old surname, that Yugoslav regime did give change, once and for all.

From Ramović to Flamuri, changing the surname to our father's first name was a logical step, not out of love, but more out of the nationalistic fervour that by this time was reaching the tipping point in our lives.

The first tension arose between us as Naim, would not pay attention to advice that when we'd sign for our new passport, it should not be different from his usual signature. But my pleading fell on deaf ears, as the police officer dutifully refused to release the document with the proper signature.

[107] Danny La Verde was eating his minuscule moustache with his lower lip.

My present was a nice punch in my lower lip, broken teeth that to this day reminds me of the stubbornness that served him no good. Being pig-headed is one thing, but the hurt that I felt really pushed me to the brink of leaving him there and then as he fully deserved my wrath. Twins usually forgive fast, so that chain of thought was broken by Hajro Turčinovic, a Bosnian Muslim friend of Flamur, with the news, that he did have a surprise for us in waiting.

The Living Ghost

As he picked us up in his car, he kept driving past his home toward the motel we stayed at. Not in a million years, did we envisage that Naim's first encounter after so many years in waiting with this little stocky man we call father was about to happen. He was there in the room, tired almost lifeless, his motionless body staring at the TV screen in this godforsaken motel, the first impressions do last.

Naim, who had some resentment toward this helpless soul, almost evaporated as he met him in flesh and blood. The grandiose idea was always based on the lie of an imaginary father, who in real life at that moment was a living ghost. We knew that in order to have our mum Najee in our midst, Freddy, had to be a guarantor as under the immigration act at the time, the spouse visa was the quickest way for her to obtain the visa… "Easy-peasy, japan-easy."

"Let's get Mum." We got so excited. Freddy had been in the country now for over thirty years, so it would be easy to complete the formalities, or so we thought. Time was of the essence, and we did not want this matter to drag anymore, so we were adamant for Mum to start the application procedure, so the "Migration Centre's" free legal Advice in Townsville was kind enough to help us with the proceedings.

"Mr. Ramovic, can we see your citizenship certificate, as you have been in the country since 1965?"

Unease on our father's face came with a stark revelation that almost

after so many years in the country, he had fallen through the cracks of the system. Apart from the date of his arrival in 1965, there were no legal documents, nothing of tenure to help our mum in Ulqin who was waiting to be reunited. The explanation was simple. Predating the computer age by moving to North Queensland, and afterwards Northern Territory, two of the furthest states in the continent, the system had lost every track of his existence. It was like he was an alien!

He worked under aliases like Fred Hasan, and in Darwin, he was also known by the name of Freddy Papas as his Greek language skills were quite admirable. Opening the bank accounts in those days required a shake of the hand as no documents were needed. What a life!

We knew that he was a lost cause and that we would have to reapply for his citizenship certificate that would finally happen sooner than we thought. To his very surprise, he got his first legally binding document in the land he gave all his youth. As working for Danny was coming to an end, this Charles Bronson look alike was by the day becoming a caricature of sorts. Apart from good learning curve to never work for "peanuts", it gave us the strength to persevere and look for greener pastures.

We started to experience the city of Townsville in its glory in the late 80s. "The Bank Night Club", a popular nightclub[108] that with a little luck would see us working just at the pizzeria next door for real money. Being able to rent the first house in Australia was a huge moment for us. This "Queenslander"[109] at 34 Griffith St South Townsville, with a huge Mango tree in the back was quite a welcome sight in subtropical climate that Townsville…

Without the goodwill of Hajro[97] Turčinović and his wife Shida who had opened their home to us at any time, even our first paid employment at "Taormina Pizzeria" that he recently sold would have never happened without his help.

[108] Nightclub: Joint.
[109] Queenslander: A single detached house made of timber all high-set.

Romanian Revolution

How do you reconcile with the beast that completely changes when the devil that is in the bottle full of alcohol would turn Flamur into the fictional character of Jekyll & Hyde?

Alcoholism comes with no warning, and we were both so unprepared to deal with this disease that was eating our father away at our expense, as we were the unwilling participants when he would go on a binge-fest with no end in sight. We were adamant although living in close quarters with him that he was starting to resemble Dante's purgatory.

We had to bite the dust till mum's case was resolved; there was no other choice. Sudden and constant danger put both of us in harm's way, and it gave us anxiety, and the stress of the situation made me lose so much weight. Looking gaunt and malnourished, it did reflect what was going on. Saving all the money for Mum was our main goal and Freddy, by this time at odds with the embassy staff in Belgrade, was making the visa almost an impossibility as diplomacy hates rude people.

As the local TV station in Townsville was streaming the unrest in Romania that ultimately spelled the end of the communist dictatorship where the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena were both executed on 25 December 1989, one name from the live coverage made us take notice, and that was the spokesman of the Australian Embassy in Belgrade, reporting the development as it was happening. As it rolled with the credits, we wrote down her name; Lisa Kerry.

Flamur continuing his rumbling with the embassy was out of question, so we kindly asked our dad's drinking buddy, Terry Malone to lend us his services as the embassy would not pick any accents, and Terry was dinky-di Aussie. The acting was so convincing that we were given direct access for the first time to someone other than a Slavic person. Upon hearing our grievance, we were put on hold and as with some kind of magic, the best Christmas gift to be delivered directly by Lisa, she just told us that Mum could make her way to Belgrade as her visa had been granted. For this happy moment, we had to thank the misfortune of the Ceausescu couple, but life goes on and as Flamur and Terry were toasting a new round of drinks, we knew that we had no time to waste.

Taking all the available hours at the pizzeria "Taormina" that was owned by a lovely couple Peter and Betty, who were teachers by trade, was a blessing in disguise as Naim started managing the little restaurant they had at the back of pizzeria. Making pizzas and washing all the dishes was hard work hard-yakka[110,] but our aim was clear as Mum's impending arrival had lifted our spirits. We knew that Townsville was not an option either for our mum to return to this mess. Naim's natural ability to make friends and run the restaurant with ease put a smile on Peter's face as the hospitality was a different field, that it started putting a strain on his life, but to both of us, this was a natural zone.

On one of those busy Friday nights, when "the Bank nightclub" was pumping the music, Naim had a strange encounter that would change our stay in Townsville, as we knew it. As these two young customers were intrigued by Naim's accent, who by this time, was known by the Anglicised name of Nick, they insisted on learning his origin. Being used and annoyed at the same question coming to him all the time instead of his usual "Italian", he simply said Albanian!? So that makes three then as the guys were the first Albanians to encounter in Australia. This happy occasion kept the rounds of "grappa" coming as Veladin[111] Mehmet, would become a good friend and a confidante in the future to come.

[110] Hard-yakka: Aboriginal word for work.
[111] Veladin: Dean.

The only down time that we got was an occasional visit to the local casino in Townsville, and on this particular night, we were so excited that we were adamant to try our luck. The luring bright lights of "Sheraton Breakwater Casino" were enticing enough that we felt so welcomed, and as soon as we hit the roulette table, our luck started going down the drain. How could this be? Our hard earned dollars, changed into plastic chips, look harmless enough, but we could not even get a drink. Some old faces were looking at us two newbies; among them was this old Serbian bricklayer, Žika who knew our father well, embraced us warmly and gave us the only advice he could.

"Boys, tonight you die as men, so no pussyfooting around; put all the money on the highest bid."

At this time, we were playing the spinning wheel, that with each spin was making our breath shorter, and shorter, and by some magic, our last money spun, and we won! Win we did, and at the same time, we swore to never ever put ourselves into the same predicament again as the old saying, "easy come easy go" did not apply to us. Flamur was getting a hunch that we were up to something as our enthusiasm for our mum's arrivals did not fare well with him. Talking to Dean Mehmet and his lovely wife Lumi, who were both from Brisbane, and in Lumi's case, we found out that her mum was from Ulqin as well, and her uncle, Haxhi Selita, from Mareeba in North Queensland was the person responsible to find our father in the first instance. We saw the full circle coming.

The Mehmeti couple gave us the perspective that for our mum, a bigger city meant a better future, and unbeknown to her, it did not include her husband.

Lone Wolf

Mum's impending arrival, after almost a full year in Townsville, did give us wings to finally put the nightmare of living with our father behind. For so many years, he was living as a lone wolf, not wanting to change, accursed by the demons of the past that he would not let go.

We had to let him go, as hard as it was with the promise that as soon as we established our stay in Brisbane, he would join us as family. Little did he know and apart from Hajro[97] the Bosnian friend, no one would know our address, and Flamur would be the last person to know our whereabouts. The disappointment of what we had to endure put a big dint in our relationship; we simply had no room for him.

Brisbane was such a breath of fresh air, and we were fortunate to spend that first week with Dean's mother Fatime, who reminded us of our mother. We made her house our house with Albanian hospitality that we cherished.

In the end, we found a rental in the inner city suburb of Indooroopilly, an Aboriginal word meaning "gully of the leeches." As the Westfield shopping centre was in our doorstep, not having a car did make our life easier .The word "pilly" in Albanian means vagina, not as in monologues but the real one, and it was making quite a stir back home when we would explain the name of the suburb in which we were settled.

Our mother, Najee's arrival in Sydney was such a buzz, as I thought a few days in Sydney, would mellow her heart for the story she was about

to hear.

Out of nowhere, Flamur got me on the phone, enquiring about Mum's arrival…I was stone cold, just murmured, "It's so nice to hear your voice Freddy!"

On the other end of the line, my sarcasm hit home, and from that moment, he knew that I did not want him in our lives anymore.

After the initial shock of finding out the facts about her husband, Mum did not adhere to the story that any reunion was out of question. In her eyes, she was still married to him, and although Flamur had abandoned her many years ago, she insisted on giving him a chance.

"What will people think of me as an inept person? We can't ditch him now."

As the only means to convey the message that we want to meet him, Harry in Townsville did confirm our fears that Freddy was indeed in Brisbane, but could not find us, and he was at the Transit Centre in Brisbane, waiting for us for any news…

The unmistakable little figure of Flamur, pacing up and down as we approached was not easy to miss. As for his looks, he had grown his moustache that did him no favour.

"Boys, I have made lots of mistakes, and I know this is the last chance I have so let me talk to your mum about what I need to do, and you can decide what to do with me next."

We were in no mood for negotiation, but Mum's wishes to see him after 19 years of separation had to be respected.

Many years later, our mother's recollection of the meeting sealed our fate and the future as the family united at last.

"In front of me was a man I barely knew, cold and weak!?

I knew from that moment on that my will power and my faith that

had sustained me all these years, and without him, I would not let this moment deter my goal to save his soul and at the same time keep the family together.

How are you?"

"You did raise fine young men, indeed", he exclaimed.

"They're our kids, not only mine."

"As I was trying to keep a positive spin, as his body was shaking from exhaustion, this was a unique chance to start anew. I will never ask him about his past or dwell on my suffering that I had endured through no fault of my own in the communist country, being a single mother, providing for my children. All that was history as starting anew as his wife, and him as rightful husband."

Flamur was a broken man from this point. Our only request was for him to stop drinking as this was his vice; we could not tolerate him going back to the old ways, and Mum would not have a bar of it either.

"Italia Uno"

From all the years of use and abuse, our father was by this time a diabetic with liver problem from all that drinking. He was also anxious, riddled with anxiety and being around people as a family man was such a strange notion to him.

The withdrawal from alcohol, mentally and physically made him resent people as he was not used to sobriety. This caused a constant need to smoke, and by this time, he had to substitute drinks for coffee.

The news of the family finally being united did inundate us with calls from well-wishers from Melbourne, Sydney, and Ulqini. This was so long in the making that it really hit the cord with many people. Brisbane started being more of a home to us. By now, Naim was able to work in the Sheraton as a bartender thanks to this lovely Vietnamese lady, Tammy Ngyen, and I had started working in a Croatian restaurant called "Spalato" that was owned by Mišo Lušić, this larger than life character that was kind enough to teach me the ropes of the real high-end fish restaurant.

The Mehmet family did open the door, of this little community in Brisbane that was so small and disorganised that it made us wonder. The majority of the Albanian migrants had settled there after the world war and, by some magic, they were all married to non-Albanian women, except the two oldest Albanians in Queensland; Mr. Kajmak Fehmiu, who was perpetually seventy in his eighties and Mr. Hasan Bashi.

Both these elderly gentlemen had the doors shut to Albania under

the dictatorship but were wise enough to come in then Yugoslavia, our city and marry local Albanian ladies. One of them was the cousin of our dad's; Aunt Esma.

We could not stay still and decided that with the help of another Albanian from Kosova, Nuredin[112] Xhemailaj, we would open the first Albanian radio station in Brisbane, the local station 4EB[113] that will rejuvenate the community and put the Twins Flamuri on the map. As the radio in Albanian became a reality, more Albanians wanted to meet us, and by chance, we were introduced to this concreter, Peter from Ulqin, again married to an Italian lady from North Odila.

What has Peter got to do with our story? Unbeknown to him, he will become a catalyst for us to open our first business in the food industry and change the industry in Brisbane as the youngest entrepreneurs in the new community. Chance is a funny beast, you either utilise what has been given, or you never recognise what lands on your lap.

Upon learning that Peter's wife was unwell in hospital, the tradition was that the visit to hospital was a desirable gesture as it not only showed respect for the family but also the bonding of the friendship. As they expressed the well wishes, Peter was happy to introduce to us this painter of Kosova origin who was also married to an Australian lady; another Peter, but seriously his real name was Mithad.

[112] Nuredin: Dean.
[113] EB: Ethnic – Broadcasting.

Jobs on the menu for twins

By MICHELLE HELE

IDENTICAL twins Sam and Nick Flamuri couldn't stomach the idea of being unemployed – and don't think anyone else should either.

The 21-year-olds weren't prepared to let the recession limit their job opportunities, so with the help of the CES they have jumped into the hectic world of self-employment.

Sam and Nick, who were born in Sydney, but grew up in Italy, returned to Australia 18 months ago.

Their dad worked in their family's restaurant since they were 11 and completed four years' formal training in Italy, but despite their qualifications the pair had trouble finding suitable jobs in Brisbane.

Registering as unemployed with the CES enabled the brothers for the State Government's Self-Employment Venture Scheme and the Federal Government's New Enterprise Incentive Scheme.

After making submissions, the pair were each granted a $5000 NEIS interest-free loan over three years.

NEIS provides them with an income support allowance for 52 weeks, a condition of which is attending a three-week business training course.

With a little bit of support and a lot of hard work, Sam said he and his brother were moving ahead with their restaurant Italia Uno, at Ipswich Rd, Woolloongabba.

"It was very hard for us when we came from Europe," Sam said.

"Unfortunately in Brisbane we could not find the work we wanted and I thought 'We are going to do something about it'."

After the success and support the brothers received with their first adventure into business Sam thinks other unemployed people should be more willing to take a risk.

Nick and Sam Flamuri from jobs queue to shop owners.

So, the chit-chatting continued, and Peter was so impressed by Naim's eloquence and knowledge of food and service, and especially the fact that we owned the Pizzeria back home[114], that he offered us this little shop next to the major hospital in Brisbane[115], so we could renegotiate a deal with these two Italian men that were desperately seeking someone to restart the shop that had been closed for a while.

Italia Uno, Pizza and Pasta was born that day; it started like a fluke that eventually took us on a rollercoaster ride that we were not even slightly aware of.

[114] It was a lie.

[115] The major hospital in Brisbane was Princess Alexandra Hospital.

Kingswood panel van

1990.

Out of all the cars in Australia, we decided to buy the one that would give us the edge; it was this 1979 Kingswood panel van. It was also known in Australian folklore as a "shaggin wagon."[116]

Due to its long body and sturdy suspension system, this car would prove indestructible by all means.

Starting a business from nothing is a challenge in itself but not having any idea on what to cook and how to work was another cup of tea. We had a pizza oven for a start and we had to figure out the rest as we go. The name was catchy enough as the world cup in football[117] had just finished, and anything that sounded Italian was pretty hot. We had no experience in pasta at all so the sluggish start made us rethink our strategy.

Two twenty-year-olds, with an ex-alcoholic father and a mother who was willing to work but had never made a Bolognese sauce in her life. Lady luck was smiling at us, and the lady that would teach our mum was a born Italian, from Bari in Italy who spoke Albanian as well. That saviour was Dean Mehmet's Mum, Fatime from Ciobo. The family that was so kind to teach the elementary rules of Italian cuisine to our mum done in the proper way.

[116] Shaggin wagon: Station wagons with folding down rear seats commonly used for sexual activities.
[117] World Cup in football: Italia 90.

The lasagna, cannelloni, ravioli, tortellini were by now rolling out of our little shop that was becoming so popular that Sam and Nick from that day became two of the most known Italians from Milan in Brisbane. Introducing "Al-fresco" dining in the outdoor environment was a novelty that Queenslanders were not used to but were embracing in spades.

Being from Milan and keeping the facade was not easy, although the article in the main newspaper, the "Courier Mail" about two twin brothers who'd jumped from "the dole queue"[118], to being the proprietor of a pizza business was a great read, and it did put us on the map as people were curious about the feel-good story.

The government gave us a check for $10,000 towards succeeding in our venture that gave us the necessary boost which was much needed at the time. In order to succeed, we had to finish a course in business. We don't remember much about it, but instead, it gave us our accountant, Julie Sultmann, who eventually became a friend and a confidante for years to come.

The long hours and being open seven days a week did take a heavy toll on us, but we knew that persistence and the will to break the people's preconceived notion that Albanians and the food business do not mix would be put to rest once and for all.

The biggest naysayers were the Albanians themselves who would come and sip coffee and wine all day long, talking about politics and a bygone era that our dad really enjoyed as he did not charge them a penny. The business started suffering as the noise of this heated discussion would take a very tribal feel, so we decided to put a stop to it. How to best deter an Albanian, not used to paying till then for the meal was charging them to eat and drink.

Like a magical wand, the tables that were filled with people from our community suddenly started changing for the better, and Italia Uno began to function as a proper shop, not a community hub for expats.

[118] The dole queue: This is used to refer to unemployed people in a particular place and at a particular time.

Freddy being in the front of the house had become unattainable, so that was reason to keep him in the back, as apart from filling the front fridge, his people skills were next to none. If the customer would pay him with a larger note, his answer would usually be that he is not a bank to keep change, so he/she better have the right change.

Another gem was that if a paying customer asked for cutlery to take away with the pasta, he would plainly refuse to give them the cutlery with the exclamation that they should have cutlery at home.

So, from that moment on, the back kitchen was the only safe place that he could stay and not jeopardise our clientele, which had by this time become so large that we had to turn people away.

Nick & Suzy

Being next to a major hospital had its own perks, especially as it had a nursing school; we felt like a rooster in the henhouse.

The early 1990s recession saw a period of economic downturn in Australia which was matched with the high interest rate of 17.5 per cent. So, against that backdrop, we brought our first house in Brisbane. As "Italia Uno Pizza & Pasta" had become a household name in our neighbourhood, the nurses next door at the Princess Alexandra Hospital started putting us on notice.

One of these young student nurses was a girl by the name of Susan, and for Naim, this was love at first sight. As this blue-eyed girl would stroll into our lives, Naim became besotted by her presence and, in the end, we lost him in the process. Our pizza shop was no longer a priority as everything was turned upside down. Delivering pizzas was more like a drive to see Susan.

We started losing our marbles as pizzas were getting cold and Nick & Suzy by now had become an item. As the romance became serious, Naim, by now in Susan's eyes Nick "the Dick" started neglecting the duties that running a successful business required. At the end of the day, they were not meant for each other as the lust started to wane. The relationship that was based on fake values two worlds apart in the end burst like a bubble into thin air.

1993.

As war was raging in Sarajevo, Bosnia was the main news all over the world, not for the great winter Olympic Games, it hosted not even a decade ago but from the longest enduring siege after the battle of Stalingrad in the Second World War. Our aunties were both married in Sarajevo, and they were pleading to get them to safety and that meant a trip to Australia.

With the grace of God, we managed to bring them with a permanent visa and for our father to meet his sisters after so many years was a joyous moment. The same year ended with an engagement.

Sami, getting engaged in Melbourne and getting married in the same year to an Albanian-Macedonian, young psychology student was a feat in itself. If it was not for an arranged marriage as per custom, this

would have never happened in real life.[119] Flamur and Najee, only three years into their new romance, achieved the coup of a lifetime by having the oldest son married in this lavish ceremony. We splashed some hard-earned cash to show off our new found wealth by even getting Uncle Kadri and Fadil from Ulqin.[120]

A year later saw Nick married as well, this time through no fault of his own, but more of a promise that our father had made to his childhood friend Sam, that he would get his other daughter from him as well for the remaining son. Again, the arranged marriage to my sister-in-law that in our family had become a tradition of sorts, as our grandfather Jamal married into the sisterhood. Also, our aunties, Sulltana and Gulia, married two brothers as well who never agreed on anything. One was a pathological liar, the other a physical teacher, in perpetual need to cheat on our long-suffering aunty.

As the family became larger, we still dwelled at the same house but by now, another house was on the horizon for Nick.

[119] Albanians in Melbourne still keep the tradition of arranged marriages.
[120] As the old saying goes, "Stupidity has no boundaries."

Nema Propheta in patria sua…

(No man is a prophet in his own land)

1995.

Being married to two sisters is not a bright idea in the first place, but Flamur reasoned that it was better for an enduring relationship to have some form of kinship as the bond becomes stronger. Little did he know. The resentment was starting to show the first cracks in this idyll, and in the end, it turned into a not so pleasant affair.

Without a doubt, the happiest moment in my life as the scorching summer was hitting Brisbane in January the 8th was the birth of my first daughter, Valona. This angel that we were blessed with was the first thing that I truly felt was mine and the feeling was overwhelming because nothing prepares you to be a dad, especially at our young age.

After the birth of my daughter Valona, that same year, we had two more pivotal moments: first; the final closure of our beloved Pizza shop, and second; the return of our parents to Ulqin, after so much hardship and pain. In this case, our father's first encounter with the city that he did not know. Now returning as an old man, it would by all means be a shock to the system as his body was not used to European the winter, and he was quite afraid that he would not last long.

There is an epitaph in stone, written in Latin, on the top of the door in the alley of the old town in Ulqin, that says,

"Nema Propheta in patria sua"[121]

No man is a prophet in his own land. It belongs to the fallen Venetian noble count, Antonio Zanotto, who by chance I discovered many years later. It is fair to say that it summed up the feeling that our dad, Flamur had in returning to his homeland after thirty long years in Australia. Mum would again be a rock of Gibraltar as her unwavering support and dedication toward him was never shaken or broken, albeit she did suffer against her will from no fault of her own.

As "Italia Uno Pizza and Pasta" started serving the last chicken Cacciatore[122], we were contemplating the move to the greener pastures of the city of Melbourne, the second largest city in Australia, after Sydney.

We felt it was the natural move as the sisters we married were

Born and bred[123] there.

In Melbourne, at least Valona would have at least one set of grandparents as ours were by now back in Ulqin; it made perfect sense.

To describe Melbourne, we would need a separate book.

Let's take you our dear reader, who have been so patient till now with us, your humble servants, seeking not fame or glory but simply retelling you a story that many of you carry within yourselves but is still waiting to explode into the open to you as it happened.

Our parents returned to Ulqin, which would see them fighting with the ghost of the past, but also rebuilding the old house, and that was a miracle on its own. That was not even planned, but it stood there

[121] Nema Propheta in patria sua: No man is a prophet in his own land.
[122] Cacciatore: "Hunter" in Italian.
[123] Born and bred: It is an expression used to say that someone was born and brought up in a particular place, and also exhibits certain features of someone who lives there.

as a reminder that,

"Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht."

This is an old Yiddish adage meaning, "Man Plans, and God Laughs."

Despite our most careful planning, the Road of Life is unpredictable. The unknown dad of the twins became the talk of the town, as the city in mentality did not change. It was a perfect platform for Flamur to rekindle the old memories that had been hidden for so many years, but now resurfaced with the zeal of a young man at heart.

His mind was still intact, but his body was broken with the years of neglect. It was starting to reflect his mood and also his stamina as the chain smoker he was.

Everlasting is Albania

1999.

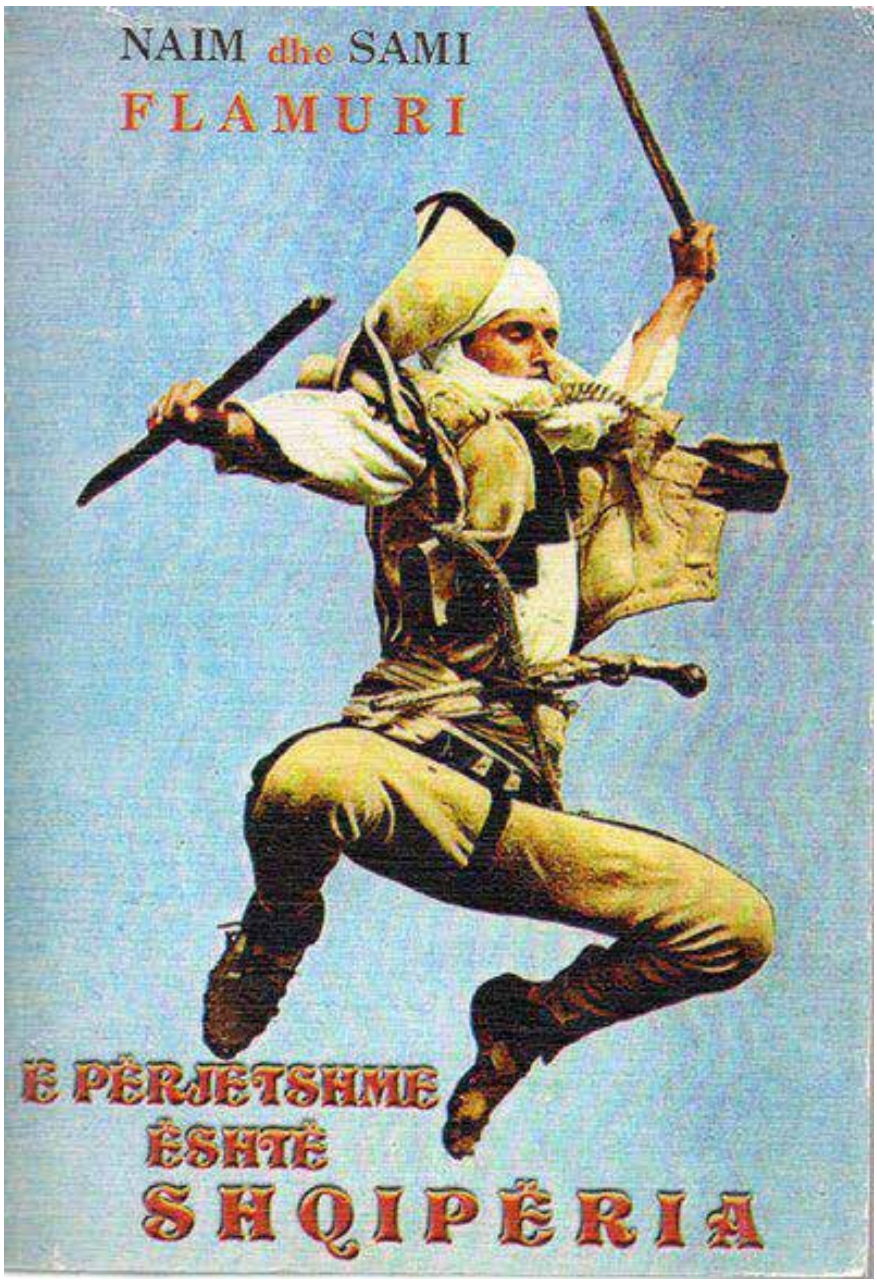
The hard work of the bee in the hive always culminates with the pure nectar of honey, and in my brother's mind, the acquired nectar was his obsession with the national hero of Albania, George Kastrioti, nicknamed in the honour of Alexander the Great.[124] This would see his lifelong search for any unknown facts about Albania and the Albanians becoming the first book of the new century.

His dedication was unwavering in the long years of running the pizza shop, becoming a father to the son that he named Shpetim Shqiptari, to the point that publishing the book became an obsession that will be titled "Everlasting is Albania", the conversation about the right of the oldest nation in Europe, the Albanians.

It was an all-encompassing venture written with passion, such a project of pure love and joy that would see the book be a reference point even in Stanford University, and many more libraries around the world. He did include my name in the book as the co-author, but in all honesty, my part was minimal at times.

As the third print of the book became the first book of the century in our beloved Albania, our other dream to meet the president of the country, his Excellency, Prof. Rexhep Meidani, became a reality as he honoured us by his presence, first by inviting us to the presidency, and

[124] Scanderbeg was an alias for Alexander the Great.


NAIM dhe SAMI
FLAMURI
E PËRJETSHME
ËSHTË
SHQIPËRIA

then attending our book launch where Mr. Arian Leka, our publisher and Moikom Zeqo, our editor had the word of praise that we will never forget.

In the capital of Albania, Tirana that welcomed all the Kosovar refugees at the war that almost obliterated our nation, we stood there with the gift of the book.

Here is a little snippet of what the book is all about;

"Given that the book is drafted in the essay conversation form, we should not be surprised when immediately after Alexander the Great would be followed by the liberation of Skopje by Albanians. These omissions are acceptable for this kind of book with free conversations. This book is an anthology of national issues from prehistoric times till the present."

Please Don't Go!

2002.

"Qeleshe" or "plis" is a white brimless felt cap made of wool, and is part of the traditional costume of Albanian highlanders, "Malisor" that our father, Flamur started wearing as his health deteriorated, to the point that we both made a trip from Australia to visit him.

Why this change all of a sudden? Our father felt his end was near as the cancer, that by this time had spread to his lungs, was an aggressive one that metastasis all over his wrecked body. His dying wish was for both of us to be near him and have an Albanian flag around his body with the cap on his head. It all made sense to him as his end was getting near.

Friday morning, 19th of April 2002, he took his last breath, and as his soul was departing from his body, our prayers were answered. The suffering stopped, and he was now in the kingdom of heaven, and we were there to bear witness and be a help to our mother Najee, who would lose him for the second time but now to the point of no return.

As the sorrowful voice, of the muezzin[125] from the minaret of the mosque announced his departure, we were both frozen as it stated,

"O, God, if he was a doer of good, then increase his good deeds, and if he was a wrongdoer, then overlook his bad deeds.

[125] Muezzin: The person appointed at the mosque to lead and recite the call to prayer for every event/prayer and worship in the mosque.

O, God, forgive him and give him the steadiness to say the right thing."

"Flamur, Son of Jamal, is dead"

As the flag of Scanderbeg, the double headed eagle of Albania, enshrouded his body, the sea of people coming to pay respects was overwhelming as it helped us proceed to his final resting place overlooking the Adriatic Sea. This unknown person, who for thirty odd years, was lost in the wilderness of Australia, today remembered by all as his dying wish was fulfilled the great sense of sorrow, did encompass us… we could not show any emotions as the tradition prohibits showing any traits of weakness which is the way of the Albanian code, so we wept in silence.

The long road that started with the dream time that our father paved this path of no return did, in the end, culminate with him finally resting in peace between the legends of times gone by and the breeze of his homeland, his heart showing us the way …

The Way Home!

Instead of an Epilogue

Pomegranate, which is considered to be "the king of all fruits" is also said that since the ancient times, the king's head-gear has been associated with the pomegranate's "crown" shape head.

Our jewel in the crown would always be our mother, Najee and her vision to see us follow our destiny that would eventually make us better human beings. As she stands next to the marble stone of our father's grave, reciting the little prayer for his departed soul, looking at her old frail figure, it is hard not to reminisce.

Naim and his new family, wife Saranda, his sons Gabriel & Mikael, are far away in Australia, while me the co-writer of this story have done the opposite and returned to Ulqin that will see me say goodbye by now to my two adult daughters, Valona and Ardita, in faraway Melbourne.

Repeating the history of our dad, our great grandfather Ramo, who have all in the end found the bliss of being among next of kin where even the stones recognise you, and where you don't get judged by looks or accents and constant questions, "Where are you from?!"'[126]

The book, as French writer Flaubert would say, has no ending.

The author simply relinquishes his hold and leaves it up to, you dear reader, to enjoy this pomegranate, as sweet and soft, that the grace of God Almighty has given us the strength to persevere with all our shortcomings and all our faults.

God never gives you more than you can bear, to him we ultimately ask the forgiveness and blessing.

[126] This really bothered me.

AMEN!

QUOD DIXI, DIXI QUOD SCRIPSI, SCRIPSI

A.M.D.G.